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BUY WAR BONDS
AND STAMPS
FOR VICTORY!
GUNS OF
ROARING
RIVER
An Action
Novelet
By
WILTON
WEST
SCOUT FROM FORT FLINTLOCK
A Buffalo Billy Novelet
By SCOTT CARLETON

# LIGHTER MOMENTS with
# fresh Eveready Batteries

*"Normally I'd consider this a dirty trick"*

**FRESH BATTERIES LAST LONGER . . . Look for the date line** ➡

REMEMBER—our fighting forces need "Eveready" flashlights and batteries and the materials they are made from. You can serve by conserving yours!

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TRADE-MARK

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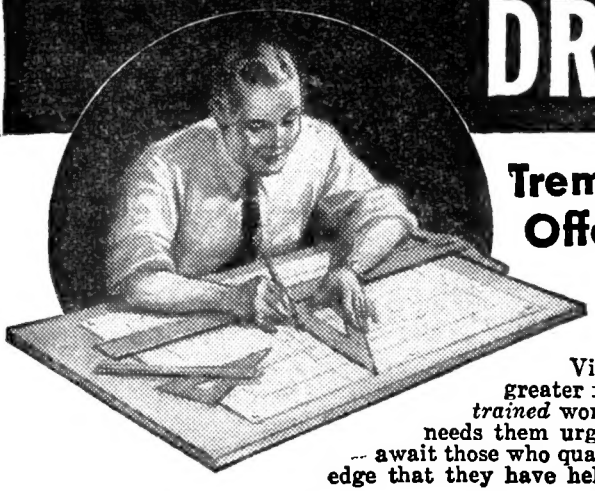
# JOBS ARE CALLING!

## Industry Needs Thousands of

# DRAFTSMEN



## Tremendous War Production Offers New Opportunities to Men and Women

At home, in spare time, YOU can prepare for a responsible job that will help to win Victory, bring you good pay and give you greater future security. America needs many more *trained* workers in almost every branch of industry—needs them urgently—needs them quickly. Rich rewards await those who qualify, and they will have the thrilling knowledge that they have helped to protect the American way of life.

### DRAFTING ONE OF MANY OPPORTUNITIES

Many thousands of workers depend on draftsmen. Before materials can be ordered—before machine production can begin—the vital work of draftsmen must be done. Yes, drafting is highly important in Aviation, Automotive, Diesel, Electrical, Mechanical, Plastics, Radio, Structural and many other industries. If you want to qualify in one of these interesting and profitable fields, or if you are already employed in one of them and want to fit yourself for a better-paying position and continue climbing, American School offers you your chance.

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During more than 40 years we have helped thousands of men and women to realize their ambitions and attain important positions in industry, business and the professions. You who have not completed high school or have missed college training, and who cannot spare time to go away to school, can get education that fits you for better things. You can learn in spare time, in your own home, and YOU CAN CONTINUE YOUR EARNINGS. Remember that top executives and department heads encourage home instruction and keep an eye on those who are determined to forge ahead and prove it by study. Never was there greater need for trained men and women at liberal pay, and employers gladly award promotions to those who earn them by learning.

### GET FACTS FREE—NO OBLIGATION

It's easy to find out about the training that will bring your opportunity. To get details and outline of study, with histories of successes others have enjoyed, write us or send the coupon. Complete information costs nothing, incurs no obligation. Let this great school, a pioneer in home study education, explain the methods that can bring success to you. Send today. The sooner you take this step, the sooner you can start on the road to fulfillment of your ambitions and, at the same time, be better equipped to do bigger things in America's drive to Victory.

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## Take This First Easy Step

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EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

# POPULAR WESTERN

Vol. XXIV, No. 2 — CONTENTS — March, 1943

***A Complete Action Novelet***

## GUNS OF ROARING RIVER

**By WILTON WEST**

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**PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.**

# Make me Prove

## THAT I CAN TRAIN YOU AT HOME FOR A Good Job in Radio

I TRAINED THESE MEN

Mail the Coupon for FREE lesson from my Radio Course. It shows you how N. R. I. trains you for Radio at home in spare time. And with this sample lesson I'll send my 64-page illustrated book, RICH REWARDS IN RADIO. It describes the many fascinating jobs Radio offers. Explains how N. R. I. teaches you by the unique method which I have developed and perfected during my 28 years of teaching Radio by mail!

### $10 a Week in Spare Time

"I repaired some Radio sets when I was on my tenth lesson. I really don't see how you can give so much for such a small amount of money. I made $600 in a year and a half, and I have made an average of $10 a week—just spare time." JOHN JEIRY, 1337 Kalamath St., Denver, Colorado.

### Lieutenant in Signal Corps

"I cannot divulge any information as to my type of work, but I can say that N. R. I. training is certainly coming in mighty handy these days." (Name and address omitted for military reasons.)

### $200 a Month in Own Business

"For several years I have been in business for myself making around $200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field." ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.

### Act Now! Many Radio Technicians Make $30, $40, $50 a Week

Right now, in nearly every neighborhood, there's room for more spare and full time Radio Technicians. Many Radio Technicians are stepping into FULL time Radio jobs, or starting their own shops, and making $30, $40, $50 a week!

Others are taking good-pay jobs with Broadcasting Stations. Hundreds more are needed for Government jobs as Civilian Radio Operators, Technicians. Radio Manufacturers, rushing to fill Government orders, need trained men. Aviation, Police, Commercial Radio and Loudspeaker Systems are live, growing fields. And think of the NEW jobs Television, Frequency Modulation and other Radio developments will open after the war! I give you the Radio knowledge required for these fields.

### How the "N. R. I. Method" Helps Many Make $5, $10 a Week EXTRA While Learning

Many N. R. I. Students make $5, $10 a week extra money fixing Radios in spare time while learning. I send EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that tell how to do it!

N. R. I. trains you "from the ground up"—covers fundamentals thoroughly. The combined efforts of more than 100 people have made the Course so interesting, with hundreds of pictures, charts, and diagrams—so easy-to-grasp, with special teaching methods—that we believe you will be "old friends" with Radio almost before you know it.

### Find Out What N. R. I. Can Do for You

MAIL COUPON NOW for FREE sample Lesson and 64-page Illustrated book. You'll see the many fascinating jobs Radio offers and how you can train at home. If you want to jump your pay—Mail Coupon AT ONCE!

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 3CO9, National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

### EXTRA PAY IN ARMY, NAVY TOO

Men likely to go into military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, should mail the Coupon Now! Learning Radio helps men get extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duties, MUCH HIGHER PAY. Also prepares for good Radio jobs after service ends. Hundreds of service men now enrolled.

## Training Men for Vital Radio Jobs

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**NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE, Washington, D. C.**

Mail me FREE without obligation, Sample Lesson and 64-page book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." (No Salesman will call. Write plainly.)

Age.....

Name

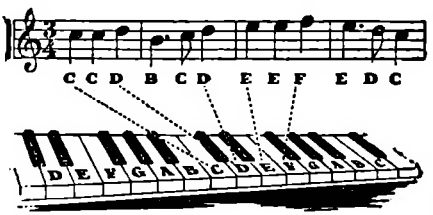
Address

City..... State.....4FR-2

# *Now!* Learn music in just 30 MINUTES A DAY!

***See how easy it is!***

MY COUNTRY 'TIS OF THEE
SWEET LAND OF LIBERTY




Look at the diagram. The first note on the music is "C." Follow the dotted line to the keyboard and locate "C" on the piano. Find the other notes the same way. Now strike the notes as indicated and you'll be playing the melody of that famous patriotic hymn, "America." Easy as A-B-C, isn't it?

## Thousands have learned to play their favorite instrument this amazingly quick, easy way—YOU CAN, TOO!

YES, thousands have learned to play quickly and easily this remarkable Print and Picture way. And if you follow the instructions . . and give only a half hour of your spare time each day . . you, too, should be able to play simple melodies sooner than you ever dreamed possible.

That's why it's such fun learning music this modern, U. S. School way. With this quick, easy method you need no special talent or previous musical training. Nor do you need to spend endless hours on humdrum scales and exercises. You learn to play real tunes almost from the start. And you can't go wrong. First you are *told* how to do a thing by simple printed instructions. Then a picture *shows* you how to do it. Finally, you do it yourself and *hear* how it sounds. Nothing could be clearer.

And just think! You can now take lessons on any instrument you select, *for less than 7¢ a day!* That includes everything . . . valuable sheet music, printed instructions, diagrams and pictures, and our Personal Advisory Service. No wonder thousands have taken advantage of this modern way to learn music . . . and to win new friends, and greater popularity! **U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC, 2943 Brunswick Bldg., N. Y. C.**

### YOU NEED MUSIC TO RELAX AND CHEER YOU UP AFTER A HARD DAY

To do your best for the all-out war effort, you need relaxation and recreation. And there's nothing like music to give you a "Lift" after a hard day. So why not start learning now. Mail the coupon for our FREE Print and Picture Sample, and illustrated Booklet. See how easy it is to learn to play your favorite instrument this quick, modern, money-saving way. Check instrument you want to play. Fill in and mail coupon *today!*

Before I took your course I didn't know one note of music. Three months later I started to play for dances. I've been invited to many parties. **R.M., Vancouver, B.C.*

It is beyond belief what benefits I have derived from your course that you sent me at such a bargain.—**W. E., Cusick, Washington.*

** Actual pupils' names on request. Pictures by Professional Models.*

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I am interested in music study, particularly in the instrument checked below. Please send me your free illustrated booklet, "How to Learn Music at Home," and Free Print and Picture Sample.

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| Piano | Plain Accordion | Ukulele | Modern Elementary Harmony |
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| Hawaiian Guitar | Saxophone | | |
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| | Tenor Banjo | Piccolo | |
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Have You Instrument?.....

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Address .....

City ..... State.....

Note: If you are under 16 years of age, parent must sign this coupon. Save 2¢: Send coupon on penny postcard.

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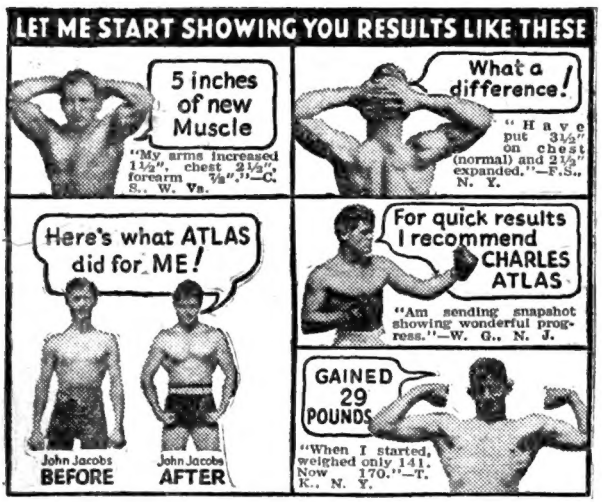
LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE
5 inches of new Muscle
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What a difference!
"Have put 3½" on chest (normal) and 2½" expanded."—F.S., N. Y.
Here's what ATLAS did for ME!
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For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS
"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress."—W. G., N. J.
GAINED 29 POUNDS
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Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

## Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

### What's My Secret?

*"Dynamic Tension!"* That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through *"Dynamic Tension,"* you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid LIVE MUSCLE.

My method—*"Dynamic Tension"*—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy. Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of *"Dynamic Tension"* almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc. —to BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY.

### Send for Free Book

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became NEW MEN in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped THEM do. See what I can do for YOU. For a real thrill, send for this book today. AT ONCE. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 773, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

**CHARLES ATLAS,** Dept. 773
**115 E. 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.**

I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address

City ..... State.....

☐ *Check here if under 16 for Booklet A.*

# The HOME CORRAL

## A DEPARTMENT FOR READERS

CONDUCTED BY

## OLD DOC TRAIL

HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! I'm just back from the biggest, richest, busiest, wickedest boomtown the West ever knew! Cripple Creek, Goldfield and Dawson were babies compared to this giant. All the fabulous millions that floated around in Virginia City and the Comstock Lode were just small change. Sprawled in a desert basin in rugged southern Nevada is this new wonder of the West, Las Vegas.

I've known Vegas since the last war. It was a raw little desert outfitting town then, a place where prospectors mostly, with a smattering of Injuns, cowmen and assorted specimens came and went.

There was a bleary block or two of gambling joints, saloons, and such and two-three hotels of the brass spittoon sort. A few stores, a railroad station, a jumble of shacks. That was about all.

I knew Vegas when the daring dream of Boulder Dam began to take form on the nearby muddy Colorado. I was there again when the dam was finished and the thousands of sweatbacks went and the slump came.

Under a blistering sun old Vegas shrunk like a blowed-up chuckwalla lizard that a Piute had punctured with a stick, back to her normal size.

### *Vegas Wakes Up*

Then came this war of all wars and sleepy Vegas woke up again. Out there, 300 miles from Los Angeles, the brawn and brain of America poured in by the thousands until Vegas filled and overflowed in all directions. Now, hardly a year since, the town has spawned a litter of other magic young cities.

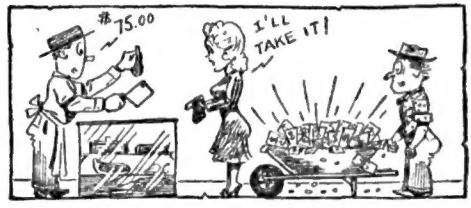
Greatest of these is the enormous plant of Basic Magnesium, Inc., halfway between Vegas and the dam, on a spot that was only windswept creosote bush when Pearl Harbor came.

Basic Magnesium, a 75-million-dollar set-up, lifting its dust and smoke to the clean desert sky. Hugest war plant in the world that has brought together the strangest hodge-podge of humanity under the sun.

Then, off to the east lies McCarran Field, with miles of barracks and runways and swarms of tanned young flyers.

Boulder City, poised above the immense blue Lake Mead, is the laboratory of a hundred weird enterprises, all hooked up to the power lines that march in all directions from the great dam.

The hills and lonely canyons are bright-scarred with new mine dumps where precious tons of strategic ores pour out of the ground. Ranchers as far away as southern Utah are cropping every acre where food-




stuffs will grow, and rushing it into the hungry maw of this monster boomtown.

### *A Twenty-four-Hour Town*

Old Las Vegas is the centerpiece of this vast dynamo of human energy. It's a 24-hour town. The stores never close. The streets and sidewalks are jammed night and day. The old honkey-tonks have expanded into gaudy, brilliantly-lighted clubs where anything goes.

Vegas is a wide-open town, always has been. It's a big money town where folks toss silver dollars at a roulette number as though they were pennies.

The population is plum unguessable. Every house and room and auto court is filled and out into the empty desert shacks and tents pop up and trailers sizzle in the sweltering sun. The government builds a unit of 1,000 air-conditioned homes. They're filled before the last nail is driven, with a wash fluttering on the clothesline. Skilled workmen knock out $100 a week and wonder where it goes. There's 12,000 at Basic Magnesium alone.

### *Swell Oasis*

An elaborate rancho hotel sprouts up on the outskirts of town, a swell place where it costs you ten bucks to take off your hat.

*(Continued on page 10)*

# MEMBERS of ARMED FORCES and ALL WAR WORKERS INCLUDED in ATLAS MUTUAL

# $1 A MONTH

# WHOLE FAMILY PROTECTION

## UP TO $1,000.00 CASH BENEFITS NATURAL OR ACCIDENTAL DEATH

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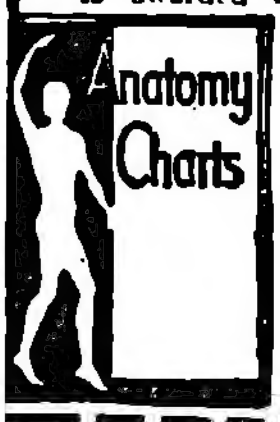
Learn this interesting money-making profession in your own home by mail, through our home study course. Same instructors as in our NATIONALLY KNOWN resident school. A diploma is awarded upon completion of the course. Course can be completed in 3 to 4 months. High School training is not necessary. Many earn big money while learning. The Army and Navy need hundreds of experts—both men and women.

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Enroll now and we will include uniform coat, medical dictionary, patented reducing roller and Hydro-Therapy supplies without extra cost. The reducing course alone may be worth many times the modest tuition fee.

Send coupon now for Anatomy Charts and booklet of photographs and letters from successful graduates. These will all be sent postpaid—FREE.

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Dept. 663—100 E. Ohio St., Chicago

You may send me FREE and postpaid, Anatomy Charts, booklet containing photographs and letters from graduates, and complete details of your offer.

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Address .....

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**For Musical Setting**

Mother, Home, Love, Sacred, Patriotic, Comic or any subject. Don't Delay—Send us your Original Poem at once—for immediate consideration and FREE Rhyming Dictionary.

RICHARD BROTHERS 74 WOODS BUILDING CHICAGO, ILL.

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New sharpener for all makes of double-edge razor blades performs miracles! "Not necessary to change blades," writes one user. Another says, "Have used 1 bladeover 730 times." RAZOROLL really sharpens blades because it strops on leather. Gives keen, smooth shaving edges. No guesswork. Blade held at correct angle and proper pressure—automatically. Just turn crank to sharpen blade. No gears. Well made. Handsome, compact, sturdy. Weighs few ounces. Will last years. Makes ideal gift.

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RAZOROLL COMPANY
520 North Michigan Avenue, Dept. 203, Chicago, Illinois

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DEPT. 2-C3 EAST ST. LOUIS, ILLINOIS


# THE HOME CORRAL

*(Continued from page 8)*

Right off a bigger and more expensive-looking oasis appears near it, like a heat mirage.

Three years ago a man advertised a small business for sale in Las Vegas, for $800. He wants to sell out now for $25,000. Already he's made enough to retire for life.

The life of most boomtowns is short. But Vegas is not like the others. It's more than a war city. The peacetime demand for magnesium alone will increase instead of diminish. It's the new featherweight metal, also the base for tracer bullets and flares. Up through Nevada thousands of tons of magnesium carbonate, the ore of magnesium, has been located.

The ore concentrate reaches the plant in the form of a whitish powder, which is poured into a conglomeration of machinery that looks like something dug up out of hell.

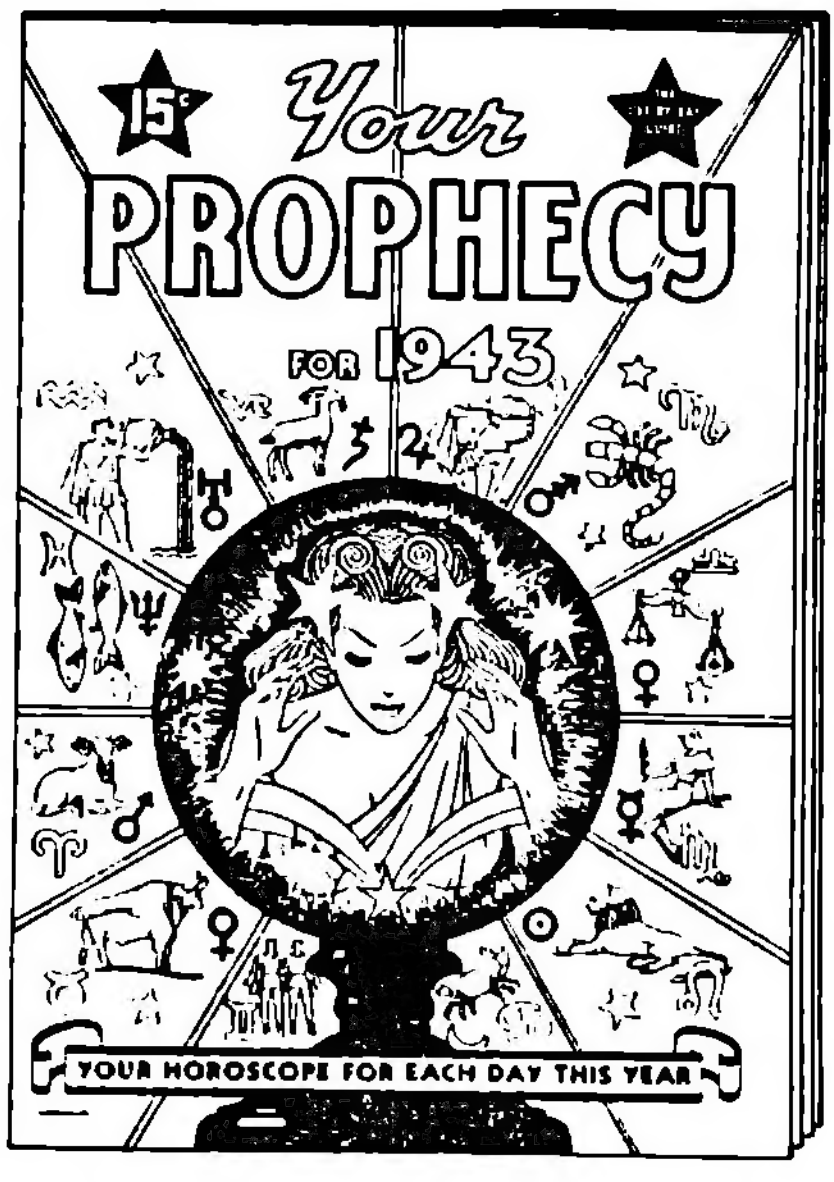
### *Mineral Riches*

From those furnaces and retorts and molds already is coming the white, light metal that will reach a production goal of 50,0000 tons a year. It's helping to kill Japs and Germans now.

After the war it'll be a part of your new automobile, your house, and your furniture. It'll be made into ships that ply the peaceful seas, and planes that hum over free nations.

*(Continued on page 12)*


## THE ASTROLOGICAL EVENT OF THE YEAR

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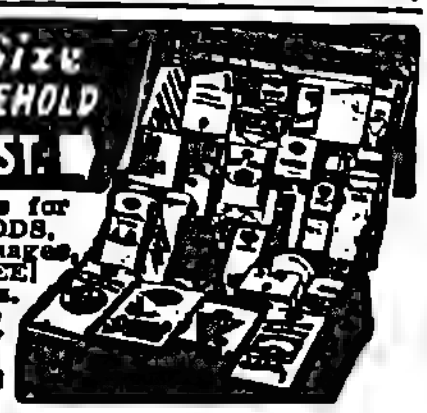

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# THE HOME CORRAL

*(Continued from page 10)*

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The oldtime out-at-the-elbow prospector is a forlorn and lonely figure in this hurry and flurry. Maybe you'll find one dozing in the shade on the courthouse lawn, or leaning sad-eyed at the end of some bar. He'll be full of the oldtime desert yarns.

"Yessir, I owned the richest alum mine in Nevada one time," one of these old geezers told me.

"Sell out?" I asked him.

"Nope."

"Lose it?"

"Nope."

"Pay streak quit on you?"

"Nope."

"What happened?"

"Well, stranger, it was thisaway. Along come a cloudburst. It flooded my alum mine and shrunk it up so small that I couldn't find it even on the map."

### *The Dice Rolls*

The pale gambler with the soft hands and green eyeshade over his blinkless eyes is exactly the same type that has snatched the earnings of hard-working, hard-drinking men since pick and shovel days.

The swift, neat bartender listens to hard-luck stories in the same old polite way. The dice roll and the cards fall and the little ball clicks in the same old number on the roulette wheel, the number that nobody seems to have covered on the table. The chips rattle as the croupier rakes them in to the tune of the same old chant.

These and the old prospector, and the wild burros that bray back in the hills on moonlight nights are the same. But in about every other way, old Vegas is changed!

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*(Continued on page 108)*

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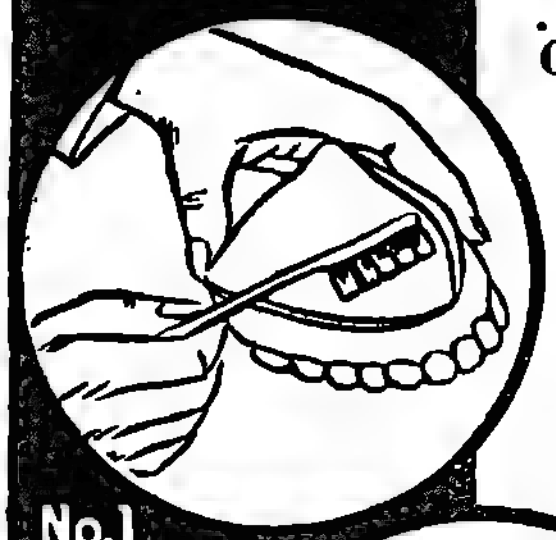

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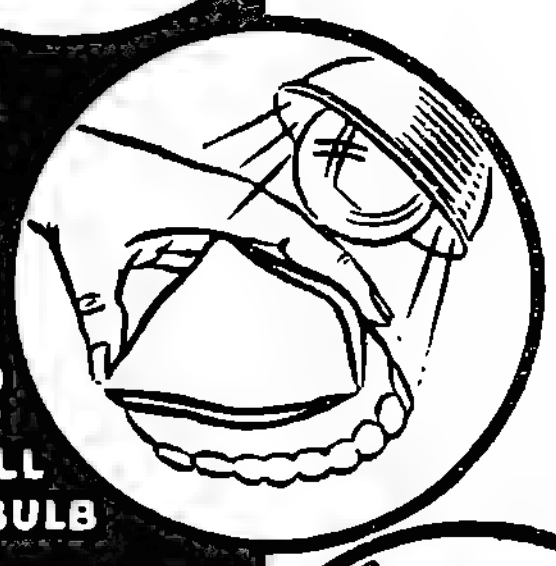

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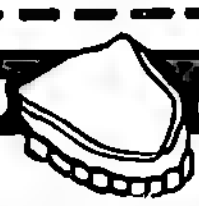
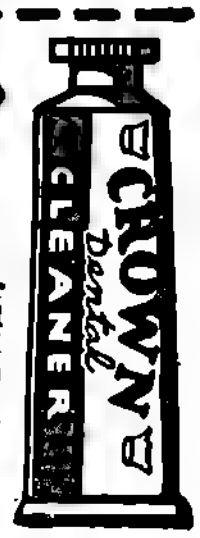
*Order this*  *this* **FREE**

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# GUNS OF Roaring River

## *An Action Novelet*

**By WILTON WEST**

### CHAPTER I

*Blazing Emigrant Wagon*

RIDING leisurely toward the distant, rock-walled canyon that led to his Sleeping M ranch, Lance Harding thought of the two filled sacks of gold dust in his saddlebags. For several months he had left the administration of the outfit to Billy Bridges, tough but honest sixty-year-old cowpuncher, while he worked his newly discovered gold strike in remote, unoccupied Roaring River Canyon.

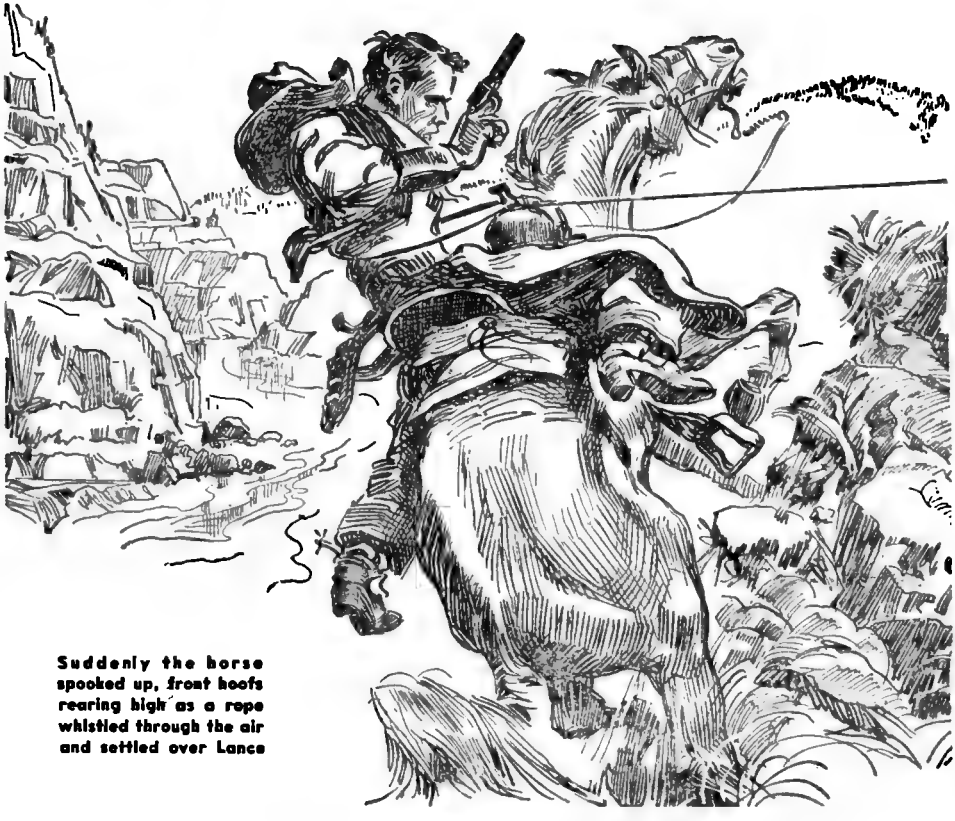
Harding had pledged old Billy to secrecy, fearing a rush of men to the spot and a possible jumping of his claim if news of the gold discovery leaked out.

Thus far, he had been mining enough gold to make extensive improvements in the Sleeping M and it would soon be the type of ranch he had always longed to own.

Suddenly Harding's happy reflections were interrupted by the faint crackle of gunfire ahead of him. Tension rippled his facial muscles, narrowed his eyes as he dug in his spurs

Lance pulled his mount to a sliding halt as both his guns flamed

# Lance Harding Takes the Trail of the Wolf



Suddenly the horse spooked up, front hoofs rearing high as a rope whistled through the air and settled over Lance

and sent his horse galloping up a long grade.

At the top of a bare ridge some minutes later he jerked the animal to a sliding halt while he gazed in grim horror at a blazing emigrant wagon in the desert below him.

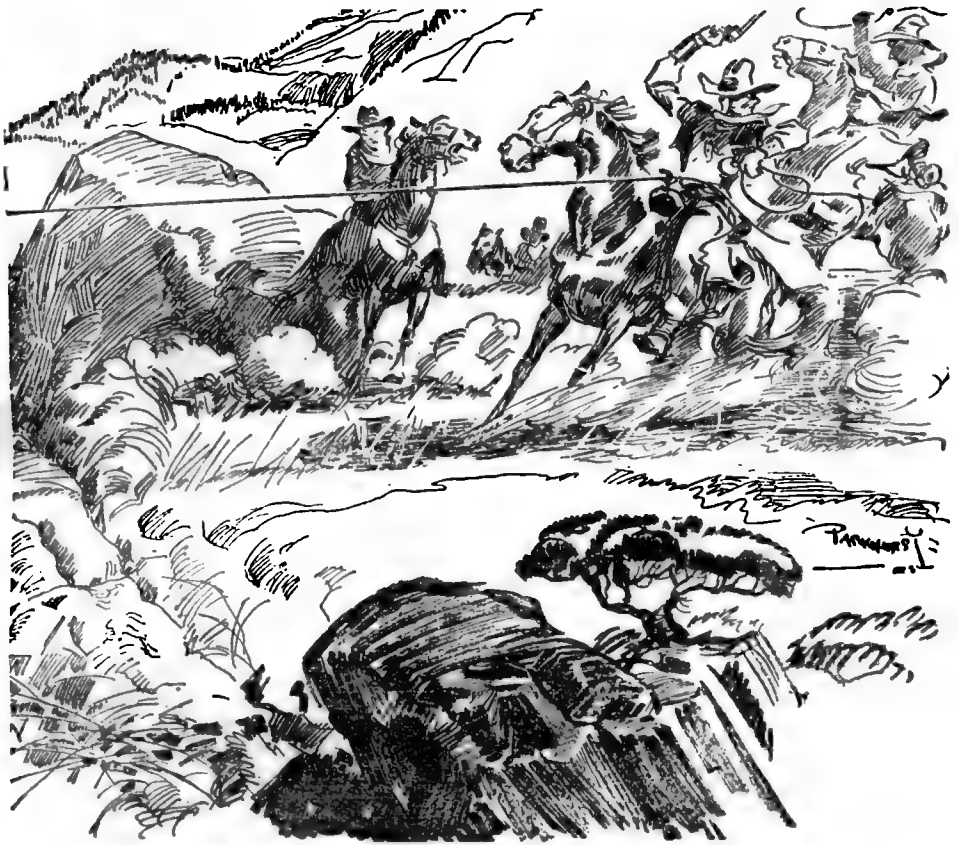
Numb with fear for any people who might be trapped in the wagon Harding went plunging down the yonder slope, idly noting that there was no wagon team in sight.

Black smoke plumed into the air and heat from the leaping flames struck him in a savage blast when he reached the hollow and saw the lifeless body of a white-haired man dressed in rough range clothes sprawled on the ground.

The man had been shot several times in the chest, his pockets had been emptied and rough hands had ruthlessly scattered supplies around the wagon. Looking carefully about, Lance saw no sign of the raiders. They had vanished completely, making their getaway while he was rushing to the spot.

HANGING from the rear of the wagon was a woman's dark dress. He rode around, calling out, hoping to find the woman, but no answer came. Back beside the wagon again, Lance saw a worn leather pocketbook and opened it to find a few empty envelopes, all addressed to a Mr. Jake Bonner. The name was unfamiliar to him.

Pocketing the envelopes, Lance



headed for town at once and reported the affair to Sheriff Al Bailey. A posse immediately rode for the scene, buried the dead man but found no trace of the woman.

"I'll bet it's the Wolf Devor gang again, fellows," the grim-eyed sheriff stated. "I'll land them hellions yet if it's the last thing I ever do."

Lance exhibited the empty envelopes and all agreed the dead man must have borne that name—Jake Bonner. But there the trail of identity seemed lost.

"Ain't never been no Bonners in Crimson Valley," the sheriff said.

"They must have been strangers, all right, folks," stated Mace Shaw, the local banker who was in the posse. He looked at Lance suspiciously. "But how come *you* were right here, Harding? This ain't on yore range, no way."

Lance flushed under the implied accusation, but to tell of his little gold strike down in Roaring River Canyon would find the place packed with every man from town, within a few hours. He shrugged his wide shoulders.

"Just happened along, Shaw," he explained casually, "hunting some of my stray cows. I heard shots and found this wagon and the dead man like I told yuh."

"Well, no use stayin' here any longer," decided the sheriff. "Let's get back to town."

Back in town, Lance tied his horse to a rack and, with his gold-sacks entered the bank. Shaw was sitting at

his big desk, smoking a cigar and scowled as he saw Lance enter. He hefted the two sacks and gazed at the young ranch owner with narrowed, unpleasant eyes.

"Good dust, Harding," he admitted, looking into each sack, "but some folks might say yuh took 'em off Bonner's body."

Again Lance flushed and his eyes angered coldly.

"Yuh mean—" he began, moving nearer the banker.

"Nothin', Harding," the gray-haired, hard-faced owner of the bank replied, shifting back in his chair. "Don't get hot under yore collar. I'm just supposin'."

"Well, deposit this dust to my credit, Shaw," Lance demanded sternly, "and quit supposin'. I don't like yore words or yore manner."

Lance left the sacks on the desk, pocketed the receipt Shaw gave him, and strode out, still angry inside. He had always hated the banker's sneering ways.

The man held notes against many of the local ranches and always drove a stiff bargain. Lance thanked his stars no note of his reposed in that banker's greedy hands.

He did not look back, and so did not see Shaw's eyes narrow in speculation. The banker's lips became a hard line and one hand stroked his jaw thoughtfully. His gaze shuttled to a big safe in the wall.

Closing the front door softly, he opened the safe. Neatly arranged on shelves inside were stacks of bills in packages.

He deposited Lance's two sacks inside, then lifted one thick bundle of bills.

Under the rubber band enfolding the bills was a slip of paper, and on it was a scrawled name—"Bonner. Forty thousand."

With a strange satisfied air, Shaw closed the door, twirled the combination, then pulled out a fresh cigar, lit it, and went strolling down the board sidewalk, smiling and nodding as he passed people.

MOUNTING his horse, Lance rode southward toward Roaring River Canyon, unable to forget the sight of that woman's dress hanging from the burning wagon.

Who was she? Suppose the Wolf Devor gang had captured her! It was a chilling thought. He looked southward toward a rugged stretch of saw-toothed mountains, twisting ravines, trackless sands—a veritable badlands and a haven for outlaws.

Then he remembered that the sheriff had already sent out a couple of big posses searching for the woman in that tangled wilderness. Reluctantly Lance decided that he, alone, could add little to their search by following them into the badlands.

Reaching his cabin in Roaring River Canyon, he stepped down and tossed his reins over his hitch-rack. The giant canyon stood grimly silent, heavily timbered. His cabin, situated in high brush, was almost completely concealed from passing eyes. He had built it purposely that way, lest some passing cowboys discover it and his little mine which was nearby.

At the plank door he suddenly stopped, looking down. Fresh blood made an ugly scarlet stain on the sill!

Drawing his Colt, he shoved the door open and plunged inside. A low gasp burst from him when he saw the form of a young woman lying on the floor.

She was dressed in dusty riding clothes and her crude shirt was torn partly from one shoulder, stained now with crimson!

Quickly he knelt down beside her, noticing how lovely she was despite the ashen hue of her smooth cheeks. Her long golden hair was matted with blood but her bosom rose and fell to the faint run of her breathing. Somehow, he felt tremendously relieved to know that she was alive.

Lance grimaced when she moaned

under his gentle touch as he examined the bullet wound in her shoulder.

Starting a fire in the small stove, he put up some water, then lifted the girl and carried her to a bunk. When the water was hot he bathed her face, cleansed the wound and carefully removed a bullet which had lodged under the skin.

All through that long night he sat beside her, covering her with blankets, hoping she would open her eyes, and glad he had made it a practice to keep medicines and bandages in the remote cabin.

"The girl from that wagon, I'm bettin'!" he told himself. "But how did she ever get away from them hellions and find her way here!"

FOR three long days and nights she lay unconscious, moaning occasionally, while he cared for her like a brother.

On the morning of the fourth day her eyes finally opened, looked up at him dazedly, and he thought he had never seen eyes so deeply blue, so appealing. He took her hand and smiled down.

"Well, Miss Bonner," he said, "awake at last, eh?"

Fear flooded her eyes. She tried to sit up but sank back weakly, still staring at him in fright.

"Who—are you?" she asked huskily. "My Father—our wagon—those horrible men!"

"I know," Lance gently replied. "I found you here four days ago. And we found yore father and the wagon."

She clutched his hand.

"Was he—"

Her voice trembled and tears slipped down her cheeks.

Lance bowed in silence, sympathy surging through him. She seemed hardly more than eighteen.

"We buried him there," he told her quietly. "It must have been the Wolf Devor outlaws. Posses are out after 'em. How'd you ever get away from them and reach this cabin?"

"I was in the timber," she explained, "when some riders attacked our wagon. Dad. They shot him down, then fired the wagon. I was on my horse and raced away, but they must have heard me and thought I was a boy, for I was wearing boy's clothes—my riding outfit.

"They shot at me as I tore through the timber, and got me here." She touched her bandaged shoulder. "As night came, I found myself at this cabin and dropped. But where am I and—who are *you?*"

Her eyes still held dread as she studied his wholesome face, then seemed to find in Lance's expression something which assured her she was in safe hands.

She tried to smile, but when she noticed that she was wearing one of Lance's shirts under her blankets, her face crimsoned deeply and her eyes dropped.

Lance patted her hand, smiled.

"I'm Lance Harding, owner of the Sleeping M ranch twenty miles north, near Guntown, and this is my cabin where I stay sometimes in Roaring River Canyon. I found yuh on the floor, unconscious. Ain't nobody here but you and me, Miss Bonner, but yuh're plumb safe. Soon's you can ride, we'll head for town. Anybody there yuh know?"

THE fear slowly faded from her eyes.

"Yes," she told him, "an uncle by marriage, but I've never seen him yet. Dad and I were on our way to him, meaning to buy a ranch and settle here in Crimson Valley. Father had sent most of our money to Uncle by stage for deposit in Uncle's bank.

"Maybe you know him—Mace Shaw, the banker in Guntown. He'd written us there was a nice ranch here for sale." Fresh tears came and her voice choked as she added: "But then those dreadful men came and—"

A storm of sobs shook her. She buried her face in the pillow.

## CHAPTER II

### *Bullet Ambush*

TWO weeks went slowly by during the girl's convalescence. During that time no riders came near the cabin. Finally, Lance's supplies of bandages, medicines and food needed replenishing. His constant care of her had brought her deep faith in his character.

Slowly her gratitude turned to something finer, more precious. As he saddled up and tossed the *aparejo* on a pack horse she saw the deep, abiding hunger for her in his eyes. Then she put her arms about his neck, drew down his head and kissed him tenderly, while her eyes glistened with grateful tears.

"Lance, you've been wonderful to me. I—"

Embarrassed, she buried her face against his old shirt. He drew her close.

"I—I—love you, Bessie," he whispered huskily.

Then, also embarrassed and ill at ease, he vaulted into his saddle and leading his pack-horse, loped away for Guntown.

Bessie Bonner stood there in front of the little cabin, smiling gloriously now. Time and her slow recovery had assuaged her first grief, and Lance's wonderful care of her had brought love to her young heart.

During his ride to town, Lance thought of all she had told him. Her father had forwarded forty thousand dollars in bills by stageline to Mace Shaw for deposit in his bank.

Recalling how the banker had stated, at the site of the wagon raid that he had never heard the name of Bonner, Lance's gray eyes gleamed with hot rage and his square jaw hardened. Some grim resolve made him decide to visit Shaw and demand a reason for the banker's statement.

Arriving in Guntown, Lance rode straight to the bank and went inside. As he had expected he found Mace Shaw at his desk in his office at the rear of the building.

No one else was present. The two sat down facing each other. Shaw wore a crafty smile and examined the young owner of the Sleeping M with a careful attention while he lit a fresh cigar.

"What can I do for you this time, Harding?" he asked. "Depositin' some more of that mysterious gold dust?" His tone was both contemptuous and challenging.

Lance studied him steadily. Big, sturdily built, bronzed and with keen, pale gray eyes, Shaw was not pleasing with his cold way of staring at a person. Lance decided the banker could be a very doubtful friend to anyone, and a mean enemy.

"No, not this time, Shaw," he replied levelly. Then he suddenly leaned forward and spoke crisply: "I'm askin' you if you received a forty-thousand-dollar stage shipment for deposit, sent to you by Jake Bonner, the man whose body we found down at that burned wagon."

Shaw's rugged face flushed and his eyes hardened, but he spoke coolly.

"Gone loco, Harding? Of course not. I never heard of the man until you showed us his body down there."

Lance relaxed in his chair, rolled a cigarette, suspicion deeply in his mind now. Some vague instinct, some elusive quality in Shaw's manner left Lance with nagging doubts. Although he could not be certain he had a conviction Shaw was lying. In some way he'd have to trick or force the banker to open his safe.

"Well, just thought I'd ask yuh," he replied evenly. "Funny rumors often get around. Bonner probably never sent the *dinero* but was carryin' it in his wagon. No doubt the gang that

drygulched him got it. Shore a right sizable haul, eh, Shaw?" He kept studying the grim face steadily.

SHAW scowled, chewed on his cigar, threw it away and lit a fresh one and Lance noticed his hands were slightly trembling.

"Who in blazes is startin' that sort of chatter?" Shaw exclaimed.

"Let it go, Shaw," Lance replied calmly. "I've come in today to get the ten thousand dollars I've got deposited here in yore bank. I'm needin' it for an investment, today."

"Holy smoke, Harding!" the banker retorted. "We don't keep such sums on hand. We invest it for our customers. Yuh'll have to give me a few days to—"

Lance's gun was suddenly poking against Shaw's stomach. The banker went white. He almost choked on his cigar.

"Open yore safe, Shaw!" Lance ordered. "Maybe yuh've got enough to tide me over."

He rose, grim, hard-eyed, thumb on the hammer.

"I ain't got that much here," Shaw snarled.

Lance's gun pressed harder.

"Open!" he repeated curtly. His eyes gleamed like fresh steel. "I ain't foolin' none, Shaw."

White of face, lips trembling, the banker went to the safe, spun its dial and swung open the heavy steel door. The shelves inside bulged with money! And Lance saw one heavy packet of bills fastened together with rubber bands. A small white paper was on top, under the bands. Lance leaned forward and read the words: "Bonner. Forty thousand."

Suddenly overcome with loathing of the lying Shaw, he drove a kick against the seat of the banker's pants, sending him sprawling.

"Blast yore low-down hide, Shaw," he ejaculated. "You ought to be hung."

Then he holstered his gun and strode to the door, flung it open and looked back. The banker was scrambling up, shaking from head to foot, staring from wild eyes.

"Shaw," Lance said coldly, "I'm tellin' yuh something. Bessie Bonner's alive, and that's her money. See that yuh keep it here—and safe!"

He stepped outside and slammed the bank's door. He had not dared to confiscate the money, or Shaw could accuse him instantly of robbery, and the banker was the money power of the town and of most of Crimson Valley.

Lance went to his horse and his pack-animal, bought the medicines, bandages and food supplies, loading them on the pack-horse, mounted and rode out of town at a lope, heading back for Roaring River Canyon.

Inside, he was furious. He'd bring Bessie back here at once and, before all men, accuse Shaw of concealing the fact that old Bonner had deposited the money with him, and that he was Bessie's uncle by marriage and had hidden the truth.

He vanished in a small dust cloud far down the wide valley. A few moments later, Shaw's teller-son emerged from a restaurant and started across the street, heading for the bank. He was a ganglng, twenty-five-year-old, with thin lips and a narrow jaw.

Ten minutes elapsed, then young Shaw came from a rear door in the bank, entered a corral, saddled a horse and rode away at a racing gait, heading southward and taking a route that should put him ahead of Lance without being seen.

Now a heavy Colt's forty-five was strapped around his waist, thonged down to his slender thigh, and a wide-brimmed, black Stetson was pulled low over his sullen eyes.

From a window in the bank, Mace Shaw stood watching him go, an evil smile on his hard face. Slowly he rubbed his hands together with an air of satisfaction.

Two hours later, as Lance Harding rode along leading the pack-horse,

shots blazed out from some timber ahead and bullets whined past him. His horse stumbled, then collapsed. Another whining slug ripped the hat from Lance's head as he freed his feet from the stirrups and vaulted clear of his falling horse.

He struck the ground and rolled from the saddle scabbard. His lips were a taut white line across his face, as he poked the barrel of the Winchester over the dead animal's side and raked the brush and timber above the trail with a pattern of hot lead.

WATCHING warily, he caught sight of a man among the trees and fired instantly. The fellow staggered into sight and dropped headlong across a fallen log. The bright sun gleamed on the body, making a red blotch on the man's shirt stand out vividly.

Back in the timber sounded racing, retreating hoofbeats that died away in distance. Lance slowly rose, gripping his hot Winchester, and moved toward the body. His pack-horse had run behind a mass of boulders close by and now whinnied slightly.

Picking up his bullet-ripped Stetson, Lance walked beside his fallen victim, rolled the man over on his back and looked down into a sordid, unshaven face with a split lip.

"So!" he ejaculated. "Split-lip Taller, eh? Those raiders were from Wolf Devor's gang!"

The whole valley knew about the gang and that Split-lip was the Wolf's chief lieutenant. But Lance wondered why they had attacked him.

He only owned his small Sleeping M spread and a quarter-section of mountain land down along Roaring River—a rugged, timbered canyon of no value to stockmen.

Having made his little gold strike there, Lance had quietly filed on the quarter-section and kept his find a secret.

The man sprawled across the log suddenly emitted a moan and one hand fluttered feebly. Lance had thought the fellow dead.

Stepping closer, he kicked away the man's rifle, removed a Colt from the man's holster and poked it between his own belt and body, then dragged the attacker from the log and laid him on the ground. The eyes opened, looked up.

"Water!" he gasped weakly.

A gaping wound in Taller's chest told Lance that death would claim the outlaw very shortly. However, he strode to a small creek, filled his hat with water and came back to the dying man.

Taller's eyes widened and his tongue licked across his dry lips.

"Water!" he repeated in a husky whisper.

"Shore, yuh'll get water," Lance told him curtly. "Just as soon as yuh talk. It was Wolf's gang that raided the Bonner wagon, wasn't it?"

Taller glared at Lance and made no reply.

"Talk, Taller," ordered Lance, "or yuh can burn up with thirst for all I care. Who raided that wagon and why did yuh just try to kill me? What's behind it?"

"All right," half-sobbed Taller. "I'll talk—but give me water."

Lance crouched down beside the outlaw, held his hat to his lips and gave him a long drink.

Taller mumbled hoarsely, trying to get up on one elbow to look around.

"Yuh got me—but where's Wolf and the others?" He sank down, cursing. "The skunks left me to die."

The thought seemed to anger Taller and he looked up at Lance out of pain-wracked eyes.

"Watch out for—for Devor and Mace Shaw," he warned. "They're out to—" He broke off and clasped a hand over his ugly wound. "Wolf knows about yore strike—and about the gal.

"Wolf and the gang attacked her father and burned their wagon. Later, we saw yuh ride up to it and Wolf figgered yuh knew where the gal was

—and he wanted her. He planned catchin' yuh here this time and makin' yuh tell. But you were too fast with yore rifle. Got me and nipped him in the shoulder."

Abruptly the outlaw sank back, breathing hoarsely, and died.

## CHAPTER III

### *Vanishing Corpse*

LANCE rose, wondering why the man had cautioned him against Mace Shaw. The banker was a hard bargainer, but was considered a law-and-order man. But Lance's thoughts flew back to Bessie—alone down in his cabin now with the gang riding about, searching for her! He must get to her as quickly as possible.

He ran to his pack-horse, dragged off the pack, saddled the animal with his dead horse's saddle outfit and stuffed what medicines, bandages and canned food he could in his saddle-bags. Then he mounted swiftly and raced away for his cabin fifteen miles away, over rugged mountains!

He covered five miles at a fast gait. Then as he rounded an outjutting hill he jerked to a sliding halt. Lying face-down was a man's form, blood soaking the shirt. Lance leaped to the ground, turned the fellow over and stared anew.

"Holy mike, it's Shaw's son!" he ejaculated. "And he's dead!"

A saddled horse grazed nearby, its reins dragging in the grass. Lance recognized it as young Pete Shaw's pet mount.

Kneeling beside the body, Lance searched the pockets. From one he drew out a crumpled paper, spread it out and read:

**Get Harding. A hundred extra and more later.**

The note was unsigned, printed in sprawling letters. Lance studied each character and finally his eyes narrowed, became grim. He believed he had seen such printing before. Carefully he pocketed the note.

The drum-roll of hoofs coming his way sent Lance racing for his horse. He hit the saddle in one bound and his gun bounced out of leather as a band of riders, half-hidden by a billowing cloud of dust, spurred out of a thin stand of timber.

In the brief glimpse Lance had of the horsemen, he took them for some of Wolf Devor's gang. He whirled his mount, fired one wild shot as he heard a loud shout go up, saw one of the leading riders shuck out a loop in his rope.

Suddenly Lance's mount spooked up, front hoofs rearing high as a rope whistled through the air and settled

[*Turn page*]

over Lance. Fighting his bucking horse with one hand, Lance triggered another wild shot, then the rope tightened about his waist and he was dragged out of the saddle.

He sprawled on the ground, the wind knocked out of him. The riders, yelling and shouting, crowded around him, guns fisted, eyes grim. With a look of surprise Lance saw that it was a bunch of men from Guntown led by Sheriff Bailey and including Mace Shaw.

"Lift yore hands, Harding!" the sheriff ordered tersely, his gun centering on Lance's chest. To another man Bailey said: "Take his gun."

One of the riders dismounted, took Lance's gun and at the same time removed the noose from around his waist. The sheriff then took the gun from the other rider.

"I thought you gents were part of Wolf Devor's gang," Lance murmured. "That's why I ran for my hoss, tryin' for cover."

Bailey glanced at the dead body of Pete Shaw and sneered in derision.

"We don't fall for that yarn."

Suddenly Mace Shaw, his face a mask of killing rage, eared back his gun hammer, his intention very plain to see. But Bailey drove his horse against the banker, slammed his own Colt down on Shaw's gun-arm and forced him to drop his weapon.

"But he killed my son, Sheriff!" Shaw protested.

"*I'm* handlin' this, Shaw," the sheriff retorted harshly. "Let yore gun alone."

HOLLOW despair rolled through Lance as he realized his predicament, here beside the body. He raised both hands shoulder high.

"Heck, Bailey!" he spoke to the sheriff, "*I* didn't kill Pete Shaw. I rode up just now and found him dead." Then he told of the fight back at the timber. "But before Split-lip died he spilled some beans, all right; said I'd plugged him there at the log, and that I'd also nipped the Wolf's shoulder before they lit a shuck out of there. I came down this way and ran plumb onto young Shaw layin' here like you see."

He dared not reveal that he'd been heading for his cabin and Bessie; must not even tell these men of the cabin's location. And some instinct warned him not to reveal that Taller had implicated Shaw.

If his suspicions of Mace Shaw were correct, the banker might get to her. Then, with Lance a prisoner of the sheriff's he would be unable to go to her!

"We ought to hang him right here and now!" Shaw roared hotly. "A little while ago he tried holding me up in my bank, like I told yuh, Sheriff."

The grim-eyed old sheriff waved him aside curtly, contemptuously. That he was not awed by the banker's wealth or strong position in the valley was plain.

Although he had known Lance ever since the young rancher's childhood, he now leaned over and took Lance's rifle and guns, swung them over his saddle-horn.

"We'll do the rest of our talkin' before the judge, Shaw," he retorted sharply. "Boys, rope young Shaw's body over his saddle."

This done, the sheriff headed for Guntown, the rest following.

Bailey set a swift pace all the way. For a long time no one spoke and Lance could not control his nagging worries about Bessie down in the canyon cabin.

"Bailey," Lance finally said to the sheriff, "return my gun and let me go and I'll promise to report to yuh inside of the next twelve hours. I've got something important to do before yuh lock me up."

Old Bailey grunted, eyed him wonderingly.

"What's so important all of a sudden?"

"That's my business, Bailey," Lance replied. "Yuh've known me since I

was a button and I've never broken my word. But that Split-lip Taller gent spilled me a heap of beans before he died."

"He's just lyin' to get free of hangin', Sheriff," Shaw roared hotly.

Old Bailey ignored him. "Still harpin' on havin' shot holes in the whole gang, Harding?" he asked disgustedly.

"Unless dead men can walk," Lance replied, "Taller's still sprawled near that log, and from what he said, the Wolf ain't feelin' too good himself right now. Maybe I can get him."

THE sheriff drew to a halt, studying Lance keenly, big mustache wiggling.

"All right, Harding," he said. "We'll go see—you and me." He turned to the others. "Boys, go on into town with young Shaw's body. We'll be there soon. And you, Shaw, go with 'em. Yuh'll want bein' with yore son, and yuh're a nuisance to me."

Shaw and the others rode away, leading the horse carrying the body while Bailey and Lance struck off for the timber in which Lance had had his battle.

But when they reached the spot an hour later, Split-lip Taller's body was gone and the blood on the log had been covered with sand and dust, hiding all evidence! Lance stared amazedly, but old Bailey scowled and gazed at him grimly, hand on gun again.

"Come on," he commanded sharply, plainly disgusted. "We're headin' for town, pronto, Harding, and anythin' yuh say will be used against yuh. I never knew yuh to lie before."

"But, Bailey," Lance exclaimed, "I —I—"

"Tell it to the judge," the sheriff coldly replied. His gun now was out and ready.

As they loped along, Lance felt desperate. Bessie was still down in the cabin, all alone, with the Wolf and his gang riding about, hunting for her. Suddenly Lance reached out, grabbed Bailey's wrist and wrestled the gun from his hand, immediately swinging the barrel level with the lawman's chest.

"Now, Bailey, you and I are ridin' hard and fast. Split-lip Taller told me the Wolf knows that Bessie Bonner, old Bonner's daughter, is alive and he's after her." Lance hesitated, then decided to tell Bailey about the cabin and the girl without revealing the purpose of the cabin. He concluded with: "If Wolf hasn't located my cabin she should still be there. Come on, we're findin' out!"

Bailey snorted in disbelief, his eyes hard and full of scorn. But before he could make a caustic comment both men twisted about in their saddles at the sound of a rider pounding toward them. As the man came on rapidly he waved an arm and Lance recognized him.

"It's Billy Bridges, Bailey," he explained. "Wonder what's wrong up at my Sleeping M?"

"Better return my gun, Harding," Bailey advised, scowling. "Won't do yuh no good to be seen holdin' up a sheriff."

LANCE smiled grimly, passed the gun back. Then Billy Bridges slid his horse to a halt before them and stared at Lance from excited eyes. The old puncher had plainly been riding furiously, lathering his horse from head to tail.

"Lance, Lance," he cried, "where have yuh been? I've been lookin' for yuh everywhere."

"What's wrong, old-timer?" Lance asked levelly.

"A—a gal, Boss," the old cowman replied huskily. "Prettiest I've ever seen, too. She came bustin' up to our ranch ridin' a buckskin with black mane and tail and yellin' for *you*." He glanced at Lance solemnly. "I never knew yuh was keepin' a gal, son. It ain't like yuh."

"Did she have blond hair and blue eyes, a dark shirt, khaki ridin' pants, a gray Stetson with a leather band and

a belt and gun on, and a bandaged shoulder, Billy?"

"That's shore her, Lance," the old foreman admitted.

"What did she say?" Lance cried. "Quick, Billy!"

"Why, she said she's been livin' down in yore Roarin' River shack and that yuh'd ridden into town for medicine and food. A couple hours ago a big, black-whiskered gent on a buckskin with black mane and tail rode up to yore cabin, yellin' for yuh and lookin' plumb hostile. She said she was inside, out of his sight and grabbed her gun.

"The feller called out for yuh to come outside and to bring *her*, or he'd salivate yuh both. He shot through the window so she turned her gun loose. He fell off his hoss and lay as if he were dead. She saw blood on his shirt and pants. Said she mounted his bronc and busted away for our ranch which she told me yuh'd often described to her."

BAILEY scowled, gazing at Lance in disgust.

"So that's the gal yuh tried to tell me is Bessie Bonner. I'll bet this Jake Bonner gent never had a daughter. That woman down at yore cabin is probably your gun-pard — shootin' down a man the way she did. Murder seems to be rompin' along yore trail, Harding."

Lance flushed angrily under the lawman's accusations. Unfortunately there was no time for further explanations which would probably not be believed, anyway.

"Is she there at the ranch now, Billy?" Lance asked anxiously.

"No," replied the old puncher. "I told her I didn't know where yuh were, but that she might find yuh in Guntown. She headed that way sayin' she'd find Mace Shaw and get his help. She also said that the hombre who attacked yore cabin was one of the bunch that plugged her dad and burned their wagon."

## CHAPTER IV

### *Meeting the Wolf*

OLD Billy's revelation that Bessie had ridden to Guntown sent fresh fears humming along Lance's nerves. When he had learned she had left the cabin to seek refuge at the Sleeping M he had felt immensely relieved. But in Guntown she would be in as much danger as ever.

Unaware of the banker's crookedness she would seek his aid and walk right into a gun trap. And Shaw, realizing that Lance knew too much now might decide to pull up stakes, taking Bonner's forty thousand dollars and forcing Bessie to go with him.

Even the thought of such an eventuality was like a hot frenzy knifing at Lance's chest. In desperation he turned to appeal again to Bailey. But the sheriff whose face had been dark with brooding thoughts spoke first.

"Gents who have seen the Wolf say he usually rides a buckskin with black mane and tail. I wonder if he was the hombre yore gal shot down at yore cabin, Harding?" Bailey's manner had changed subtly and he did not seem to be as hostile toward Lance as he had been. "If so, she's rid this Crimson Valley of a low-down snake, and we won't have no murder charge against *her* for doin' it.

"I don't know if I should take yuh into town and commit yuh for killin' young Shaw, or if the three of us should ride down to yore shack and squint at that hombre she says is lyin' there."

"Yuh've got plenty of time for shovin' me in yore calaboose, Bailey," Lance replied. "Besides, yuh've got my gun. Let's have Billy go back to town and look for her, while you and I do that squintin' at the hombre."

Bailey nodded. "Okay, Harding, but remember yuh're still my prisoner."

"Billy," Lance cried, "burn the wind to town and find her. Stay with her until we get there; and *watch Mace Shaw*. I got good reason for sayin' that."

Billy whirled his mount and spurred away. Lance and Bailey headed for his Roaring River cabin at a distance-covering lope. After a long silence Lance handed a crumpled note to the sheriff.

"Ever seen this kind of writin' or printin' before?" he asked.

Bailey studied it and scowled, poked it into his own pocket.

"Maybe," he responded noncommittally. "Where'd you git it?"

Lance told him.

"Yuh've been in the bank often," he added, "and yuh've seen those crudely printed signs on the walls — safety boxes for rent and the like. Make anythin' out of that?"

Bailey stared at him, eyes narrowing.

"Yuh mean—"

"Just that, old-timer," Lance replied. "Same sort of printin'. Now let's tie things up a bit. Bessie Bonner —whether yuh believe me or not, that's the name of the girl Billy spoke about—told me her father sent forty thousand dollars in bills, by stage, to Shaw for deposit. Right after that Bonner was killed, his wagon destroyed, and his daughter vanished.

"Nobody here seemed to know them. Later, when I visited Shaw to tell him I needed the *dinero* I've got on deposit there he insisted he didn't have that much in his safe. We all heard him deny ever hearin' of the Bonners.

"I figured he was lyin' and forced him to open the safe. It was filled with money and one pile bore a tag readin' 'Bonner. Forty thousand.' Now, the only people who work in the bank are Shaw and his measley son. The kid, no doubt, was somewhere in town at the time. I drew my gun to make Shaw open the safe.

"I told him Bessie Bonner was still alive and that he'd better keep that money safe for her or else. Then I rode away to bring her there.

"I reckon he figured I'd lied about the girl bein' still alive, thought that *I* was the only one knowin' he had their money. If I was bumped off, who'd get all that *dinero?*"

THE sheriff studied him grimly, chewing hard. "Yuh're shore sayin' things, Harding," he stated gruffly, doubt in his gaze. "Smooth talk, but if yuh're lyin'—"

"Wait, I'm not finished," Lance broke in levelly. "Shaw probably watched me ride from town, headin' south, the only man who could give him away. Down in that timber I was drygulched, but managed to shoot Mr. Split-lip.

"But before he cashed in he said I also shot the Wolf in the shoulder, and warned me to look out for him and for Mace Shaw. Accordin' to Bessie, Shaw is her uncle by marriage. She told me that Shaw and her father had been correspondin' about old Bonner's comin' here to buy a ranch.

"After their attack on me, I rode for my Roaring River cabin and found young Shaw's body like you saw. And on his body was that printed note." Lance eyed old Bailey's rugged face steadily. "Get me, Bailey?"

The sheriff spat at a bush, took a fresh chew.

"Either yuh're the biggest liar on earth, young man, or yuh're spoutin' what'd make Shaw the lowest hellion I ever heard about." The doubt in Bailey's eyes seemed to be slowly vanishing. "Yuh've always spoken the truth, son, 'cept when we didn't find Split-lip's body. I've still got yore guns and yuh're still my prisoner, but I'm goin' to trust yuh awhile longer."

He urged his horse into a faster lope. Lance kept beside him. "If that hombre at yore shack *is* th' Wolf it'll prove one thing, anyway—that yore gal's talked straight."

Another mile passed by under their mounts' pounding hoofs before Lance spoke again.

"If we're bustin' in against the Wolf, Bailey, how about lettin' me have my gun?"

Bailey studied him grimly, then reached into his saddle-bags and handed Lance his gun and belt.

"Folks know that you and me have ridden this way together," he stated to Lance. "Remember that. If I'm found dead—shot in th' back—"

Lance laughed softly, buckling on his gun.

"Then they'll find me beside you, old-timer, my carcass packed with the gang's slugs."

After an hour's steady riding they halted in timber in Roaring River Canyon. It was a massively rugged place, strewn with boulders and brush. Cautiously they moved out into the clearing in which Lance's cabin was situated.

Immediately a gun roared from the shack and a bullet sped between them, burying its lead in the bole of a tree. Lance and the sheriff raced back to cover, firing a quick volley. that had no effect on the man in the cabin.

"Bailey, yuh've got an extra gun. Let me have it a minute," Lance asked, his features grim and hard.

"What do yuh want with two guns?"

"I aim to rush the cabin."

The sheriff hesitated and in that moment of doubt Lance shoved his horse against the old lawman's and grabbed the extra Colt from the waistband of his trousers.

BEFORE Bailey could stop him, Lance stormed out into the open. Two bullets droned past him as the man from the cabin fired again. He caught a brief glimpse of a tall bearded figure standing to one side of an open window, a rifle thrust out toward the yard.

Halfway across the clearing Lance pulled a surprise maneuver. He pulled his mount to a sliding halt as both his guns came up flaming. He sank home his spurs, then, and plunged up to the cabin door when he heard an agonized cry and saw the bearded face drop from view.

Lance leaped from the saddle as the sheriff came racing up behind him. Entering the cabin they saw the roughly garbed figure of Wolf Devor sprawled on the floor. The Wolf's hands were clutched to his side where fresh blood was seeping through his fingers.

Kicking away the outlaw's rifle, Lance saw the man had four bullet wounds. Wolf Devor had suffered a shoulder wound in the ambush attempt on Lance. One of Bessie's shots had creased his skull and still another had broken a thigh bone. The leg was horribly swollen and inflamed.

"He's shore in a bad way," the lawman commented, taking the gun Lance handed him. "His leg's infected and that bullet yuh put in his side just now won't help him any."

The outlaw opened his eyes. His lips twisted with pain and hatred as he saw the sheriff's badge.

"Yuh're our prisoner, Wolf," Bailey told him sharply. "We're bandagin' yuh up and luggin' yuh to town as soon as yuh can move."

The outlaw's face blanched under his bronzed skin. They worked rapidly, tearing strips from their own shirts and his, and stopped the bleeding.

"They'll string me higher than a kite, Sheriff," the Wolf muttered huskily. Abject fear rolled in his eyes. "I'll turn State's evidence if yuh'll let me go. I'll leave this country for good."

Old Bailey was a keen law officer, knew the Wolf was in bad condition. The time to get his confession was right now. He had Lance bring paper and a pencil.

"Spill it, Wolf!" he ordered the prisoner, and gave him a drink of whiskey from a flask.

"We've been sellin' rustled stuff to Shaw for a good while," the Wolf confessed between drinks and gasps of pain. "Then he hired us to kill off an old jasper named Bonner and his gal, who were due to arrive by wagon. We did the job. His son came down with our money, later.

"Then the kid came again with a note from Shaw tellin' us to bump Harding off, payin' us more."

THE Wolf gazed up at Lance from pain-racked eyes, hands over his terrible leg before he continued.

"That's why we tried dry-gulchin' yuh in that timber, but yuh killed Split-lip and got me in the shoulder. That fool kid started shootin' at yuh before we was set, and downed yore bronc. But yuh done for us.

"I was so blasted mad at Shaw's kid for spoilin' our play that I plugged him. Reckon he wasn't badly hit because he climbed on his horse and hightailed. There was another feller besides Split-lip and young Shaw with us. He brought me into the hills, bandaged me up and went to get the rest of the gang."

"Yore guess about young Shaw is wrong," said Lance. "We found him dead several miles from where yuh tried to ambush Lance Harding. That's another murder count against yuh, Wolf."

His body punished by the pain of his wounds and his mind tortured by visions of a hangrope death if he survived his wounds, the outlaw babbled on.

"One more or one less won't help me or kill me any quicker," he said.

"What about Bessie Bonner?" Lance demanded tensely.

"After my pard left me bandaged," said Wolf, "I got to figurin' that maybe yuh'd gone to town for a posse. Also, a couple of the boys had seen yuh several days ago in Roaring River Canyon though they couldn't find out what yuh were doin' there.

"I had a hunch yuh might have a cabin there for some reason and that the gal might be there. She'd seen us kill her old man and might talk so I had to take care of her. Besides, Shaw wanted her out of the way.

"I rode here but somebody plugged me from inside the cabin, drilled my head and leg. I passed out."

He groaned deeply and sank back. But Lance lifted him to a sitting position.

"Sign this, Wolf," he commanded. "I've been writin' down every word. But first, what happened to Split-lip's body?"

"We—we dragged it away and buried it."

Slowly and laboriously, then, the Wolf signed the confession. His fingers barely had the strength to complete the task before he fell back unconscious.

Bailey laid a hand on Lance's shoulder. "Yuh've shore earned yore gun, Lance, and I'm appointin' yuh my deputy right here and now, till we git things straightened out."

## CHAPTER V

### *Showdown Fight*

GUNTOWN lay swathed in the hot afternoon sun. Along the worn board sidewalks cowmen gathered under wooden awnings, talking of the attack on the Bonner wagon, of the killing of young Shaw, of the Wolf's gang, and of the accusation against Lance made by Shaw. Stern faces and excited feelings were plain.

On a billiard table in the main saloon lay the body of the banker's son. Shaw had had it placed there so that the whole town might see and be aroused against Lance.

The banker had succeeded in stirring up deadly passions against him.

As yet, none knew of Bessie's existence. That the woman who had been with old Bonner at the wagon had been taken away into the badlands by the outlaws and probably done away with, was the general belief.

Shaw moved about from group to group, a forceful, dominant, wealthy man, and men regarded him sympathetically as he related how he had found his son's body, bullet-ridden, with Lance Harding standing beside it.

"Harding'll be coming along soon, gents," he told everyone, "with Sheriff Bailey who's arrested him. What are we going to do with that killer of my boy?"

"String him up!" voices roared back.

But suddenly a dangerous, grim silence swept the crowd as all stared down the dusty street. Shaw himself stopped in his tracks, fingering his holstered six-gun, eyes bulging.

Into the south end of the street rode two gaunt, grim horsemen; and between them was a third horse dragging a travois, improvised out of ropes and poles. On it lay a black-bearded man, under a blanket.

"Here they come, boys!" a cowboy yelled excitedly.

"Let's git them two hellions quick," Mace Shaw's voice rose above others. "Wonder they ain't killed Bailey on their way up here."

Followed by the horde of cowmen, he strode toward the coming group, gun almost out, eyes glaring his fury. Suddenly a man in the crowd shouted:

"Look out, folks! Harding's wearin' his guns. Maybe the Wolf's got one under that blanket."

Bailey heard and drew to a halt, Lance beside him. The old peace officer's eyes hardened grimly.

"Folks," he spoke to the crowd levely, "what's bitin' yuh? Lance and me have brought in the Wolf, and he's shore badly hurt. Somebody get the doc." He scowled as he saw men's hands were resting on their guns. "Don't start playin' fools, boys. Lance is my deputy and the Wolf's our prisoner."

"Harding murdered my son!" Shaw roared. "We ain't waitin' on any court or—"

He tugged at his gun.

"That so, Shaw?" Bailey broke in. "So you been workin' all these folks up against Lance, eh?" Suddenly his six-gun covered the banker. "Toss your gun away, Shaw, quick, or I'll shore plug yuh."

BAILEY rode closer and Shaw dropped his gun, stood scowling. The sheriff studied the gaping crowd, eyes steel-hard. "Folks, listen to me a moment. Yuh're after the wrong man if yuh're aimin' to hang Lance Harding."

He looked again at Shaw.

"Let me tell yuh how yore son died. Him and the Wolf and that Split-lip hombre and one other outlaw tried tuh drygulch Lance down below. But Lance proved too fast with his Winchester, shot Split-lip who died there a little later and wounded the Wolf. The Wolf was sore because yore son fired too soon, downed Lance's bronc which gave Lance some chance to shoot from cover, and so he plugged the younker while he was runnin' away among the trees.

"And *you* sent yore son down there to hire that gang to kill Lance off, 'cause Lance knew yuh had Bonner's forty thousand in yore safe yuh were careless about that—leavin' Bonner's name on the package. But I reckon yuh didn't think anyone would ever see the inside of that safe but yoreself.

"You feared Lance might squeal. And *you* hired that dirty gang to murder old Bonner and his daughter and burn their wagon so you could keep the money. Things broke wrong when she managed to get away before they could grab her."

Shaw's rugged face mottled, became ashen. His eyes wavered as he looked around desperately.

"It's all a blasted lie, Bailey!" he bellowed.

"Yeah?" retorted the sheriff sternly, drawing out the Wolf's confession from a pocket. "Well, here's the Wolf's full confession, signed and witnessed. He's turned State's evidence. Yuh're under arrest, Shaw." He waved a hand at the staring crowd. "Lock him up, boys. We'll take him before the judge later."

As men grabbed the banker he stood strangely unresisting, though his eyes flamed and his lips twitched. Bailey pulled out the printed note Lance had found in young Shaw's pocket and held it up for all to see.

"And here's somethin' else, folks. A note in Shaw's own printin', tellin' the Wolf to bump Lance off and payin' a hundred extra. This note was right in young Shaw's pocket when Lance found him shot dead down there. If anybody doubts this writin', just take a squint at them signs tacked up inside the bank."

While listening to the sheriff, the men holding the banker had relaxed their grips. Shaw now broke loose, dashed inside the bank and slammed its heavy door. It would take a battering ram to break it open.

The town doctor came up and, after a look at the Wolf had him carried into his office. Then Bailey quickly related how he and Lance had captured the outlaw.

A loud roar went up from a score of throats.

The crowd began to rush toward the bank.

"Come on, gents!" yelled one man. "We'll get Mace Shaw if we have to break the door down."

MEN rushed to a pile of logs, lifted one up. Back at the bank's heavy door, they began driving crashing blows against it. Lance and Bailey listened for sounds within, but none came. Other men ran around to the rear door to prevent the banker's escaping that way.

Lance's mind was hot with anxiety about Bessie. Where was she? Where was old Billy Bridges?

"Anybody see a girl on a buckskin come into town, boys?" he called out.

"Yeah," a man answered. "She rode in the alley beside the bank little while ago. I saw her go inside, wonderin' who she was."

Lance raced into the alley. Tied to a post stood the outlaw's buckskin, lathered heavily. Beside it, was old Billy's horse, also showing signs of having been ridden hard. Lance ran to the side door, found it locked and solid. He ran back to Bailey.

"Their hosses are there," he told the sheriff. "We've got to get inside quickly."

He smashed out a window with his gun-butt and climbed inside, gun out and ready. As he landed on the floor, a shot roared from the rear of the long room and the bullet whined past his head, just scraping his hat-brim. Then came the slamming of a door back there in the shadows and silence.

Lance zigzagged across the semi-dark room, reached Shaw's big, flat-topped desk, stepped around it, saw a trap door in the floor and jerked it up, to look into blackness.

A flight of steps led downward. Crouching, gun ready, he started down, heard a crunching of muck and leaped straight outward as another

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**WYOMING JUSTICE**

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shot flamed from the depths beyond.

He heard the bullet thud into a wall, then landed on the mucky bottom and dropped flat, scarcely breathing, trying to peer through the blackness.

"Go back, Harding, blast yuh!" Shaw's voice spoke hoarsely from the dense darkness beyond. "If yuh don't I'll kill the both of 'em. I've got 'em here."

Lance noiselessly rolled to another spot. The Stygian blackness prevented his seeing, but if the banker were standing over Bessie and old Billy.

From up in the bank a violent crash rang out as the front door was driven inward by the battering ram. Heavy footsteps and men's shouts rang out.

"Where are yuh, Lance?" came Bailey's call.

But Lance dared make no reply. Shaw would instantly drive more bullets his way. Slowly, inch by inch, Lance started crawling towards the banker's position, gripping his gun in one hand, feeling muck under him. Then Bessie's voice cried out:

"Watch out, Lance! He's got us both here, roped."

Lance's heart leaped. Shaw might shoot her instantly now. The trampling of booted feet and the shouts of men upstairs were making a din. Taking advantage of the noise, Lance suddenly rushed straight at where he thought the banker must be.

HE STRUCK full against Shaw and both went down, battling with fists, reversed guns and spurred heels. Shaw's gun exploded deafeningly. Lance grabbed the man's wrist and twisted.

Shaw dropped the gun, cursed savagely and struck viciously, trying to find Lance's eyes and gouge them. Their breathing became like bellows as they rolled over and over. Men were coming down the steps now, calling Lance's name.

"Don't shoot!" he cried out.

Then Lance felt himself lifted bodily. Mace Shaw's strength was amazing. The banker slammed him down, almost knocking Lance's breath from his lungs. Again Bessie's voice rang out:

"I've got him, Lance. Look out!"

A second more and Shaw's big body came crashing down on top of him. Lance struck upward with his gun-butt, slashing savagely at Shaw's head and face. Suddenly Shaw groaned and collapsed, all life draining out of him.

Lance rolled away, scrambled up, gasping for breath. A lantern flashed as Bailey and others came rushing up. Bessie was lying flat, both arms around Shaw's legs, gripping tightly. It had been her grip that had plunged Shaw down, and Lance was aware that her courageous move had undoubtedly saved his life.

Now he took both her hands and pulled her to her feet. Nearby lay Billy Bridges, still roped and gagged. Lance freed him and the old puncher rose, furious, covered with the muck.

"Let me at the skunk!" he roared.

Bailey held him back, looking down at the motionless banker's form, now face downward in the muck of the chill, damp cellar.

"Reckon he's done for, Billy."

"I followed the gal here as quick as I could," Billy went on, spitting out mud from his walrus-mustached lips, "like Lance told me to. But by the time I got inside Shaw had dragged her down here. Then he knocked me out with his gun-butt and I passed out. When I come to, me and the gal were lyin' here bound and gagged."

Bessie, in Lance's arms, spoke up:

"After he knocked Billy out he told me nobody knew of this horrible cellar, except the rats. Then he went back upstairs and closed the trap door. Hours seemed to pass, and those rats—"

She shuddered, and Lance drew her closer.

"Finally, he came down here again

and we heard all that noise outside. He threatened to shoot us both if we made a noise, but in the darkness here I managed to get loose." She looked up into Lance's eyes and smiled. "Then *you* came, Lance darling—thank heaven!"

His voice husky, Lance drew her even closer, seemingly indifferent to the presence of the other men.

"I've come—for life, honey," he told her.

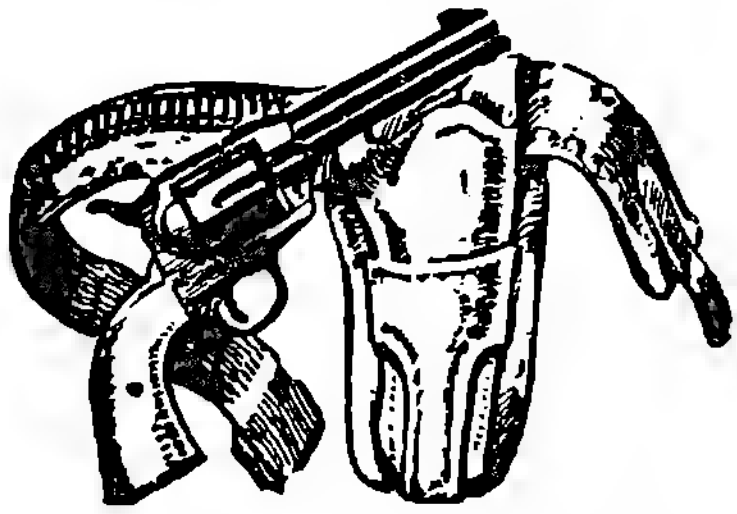
As the men carrying Shaw's body passed up the stairs, others following, the two were left alone for the moment.

He tilted her chin up and smiled down at her.

"That is, Bessie darlin', if it's okay with you."

She drew his head down and kissed him full on the lips.

"Does *that* tell you what you want to know?" she whispered.



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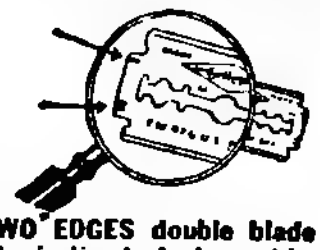

3. TWO EDGES double blade life. Marks indicated above identify edges, enabling you to give both equal use and get extra shaves

4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

Rud's gun roared savagely and Kroner, shot in the chest, crashed through the guard railing

# Too Much Rescue

## By CLINTON DANGERFIELD

*Rescued from jail by outlaws who mistake him for his renegade cousin, Rudd Lockover rides into a grim six-gun showdown!*

RUDD LOCKOVER, tired and thirsty, stopped happily at the hitch-rack of the Never Pass It, the small town's only saloon. Then the cowboy's ranging glance gathered in a big roan sulking at the rack's end.

He swore under his breath when he noticed that it was Al Prentice's horse!

Rudd, about to leave his claybank, thought over his owner's forceful instructions.

"Rudd, I'm buying that optioned

Hardaway herd," John Brocage had said. "I meant to go myself, of course, but my wife's too ill to be left. You deliver this check and letter to Marvin Arp. Make shore it's in his hands before noon Tuesday. Beef took a rise.

"As soon as the option expires the Prentices will bid on the herd, even though they'll pay twenty-five per cent higher than the optioned price. If yuh run into any Prentice on the road, be careful to avoid trouble. Time's scant, as it is. I've seen the herd. It's okay. I need it badly."

Rudd stared again at the sullen roan. Al undoubtedly was in the saloon. What of it? No one Prentice could delay a Lockover! Rudd set his sombrero slightly a-slant and walked quietly into the Never Pass It. He'd never been so dry in his whole cowboy life.

The red-eyed bartender served Rudd promptly, but he drank slowly, his gaze shifting around the room.

Al Prentice, a sneer forming on his rough-featured face, was alone at a table. "Well, well!" he jeered. "Look who's here. Errand boy for the Brocage spread!"

Rudd's swift flush burned under his heavy tan. But he ignored Al, remembering the check that must be delivered to Marvin Arp, the Hardaway heir, in time to force acceptance of the option price.

Then as his gaze passed over Al it encountered Ligg and Jupe Prentice! Like Al they stared contemptuously at Rudd. Three Prentices in this out-of-the-way spot undoubtedly tied up with the Prentices' desire for the herd Brocage was going to get! They had known Rudd would ride through here. They'd see he was delayed.

ALTHOUGH Rudd was aware of his promise to avoid trouble, the sneering looks made his blood boil. His handsome face set in grim lines.

Suddenly, for some reason he could not explain, his attention wandered from the Prentices, centered on a pair of anxious brown eyes set in a leathery brown face. An extremely tough-looking hombre was that brown-eyed man, but his gaze at Rudd was worried, not menacing. Rudd had never seen him before.

The man came softly forward, bought a drink. Standing close to Rudd he spoke out of the side of his mouth.

"Better go. Yuh're in danger."

Absently the fellow's right fingers rubbed the black butt of a tied-down gun.

Rudd didn't answer; but the advice was good. He finished his drink, bought another, tossed it down, paid, and headed for the door, only to find Al Prentice heading him off. Immediately tension put a tight clamp on Rudd's nerves.

"What's the errand boy's hurry?" jeered Al.

Rudd's jaw thrust out belligerently. Al was thirty, powerfully built, with a known fancy for boxing. Instantly Rudd decided that the Prentice idea was to knock him out cold and buy the herd the second the option expired.

The two men were close. The cowboy's right fist drove a hard punch to the point of Al's cleft chin. The big Prentice staggered, swung a wild counter and dropped under another savage right to the jaw. He collapsed to the floor and lay still.

But as Rudd moved, he was again barred, by another Prentice—Raney, who covered the cowboy with a forty-five. On Raney's shirt shone an aggressive star. He was the new sheriff in Sertain.

"Reach!" he growled.

"Why should I? No harm done," snapped Rudd.

"Yuh've killed my brother."

Rudd lifted his hands, but he coolly turned to survey the room. In it were nearly a dozen men. They all bent hostile looks upon him. Most of them were Prentice riders. The anxious-eyed man with the black-butted guns had vanished.

Secretly cursing himself for letting a cotton-dry throat lure him into the saloon, Rudd protested furiously.

"Are you loco? The big ox will be comin' to in a little while. He only got what he asked for."

"Half a dozen guns besides mine are coverin' yuh," snarled the sheriff. "Yuh're under arrest. Tomorrow, if Al lives, you can pay yore fine and go."

That night, raging up and down the jail floor, Rudd alternately cursed the Prentices and himself. That herd contained some priceless Eastern bulls. It was being sold by an unappreciative heir who wanted to live in New Orleans. It was John Brocage's big chance and now he, Rudd, had ruined everything just because of a dry throat!

The hours dragged slowly by. At midnight he stopped his frantic pacing and stood leaning against the wall of steel bars which looked out on the corridor.

Perry, the jailer, was just coming out of his little den where he'd been enjoying a solitary drink. He was whistling a tuneless monotone when a knock at the front door sent him yawning over to it.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"Coupla extra deputies. Sheriff sent us over because there's a rescue party forming for that last prisoner."

"All right. Wait a minute," growled the startled jailer. He let them in, unlocking the door. "All this fuss about—"

He never finished. An unexpected crowning with a gun barrel stretched him on the floor. The alleged deputies took his keys and promptly released Rudd Lockover. One of them offered him a gun and a belt, and while he buckled the gun on, the brown-eyed, tough-looking hombre said hurriedly:

"Let's go!"

Delighted, because he now could arrive on time, astonished, because his new friends were total strangers, Rudd Lockover found his claybank waiting behind the jail.

The three horsemen walked their mounts quietly, but the brown-eyed man whispered curses because of the necessity for quiet going. Outside of town, they galloped smartly. After a mile two more strange riders joined them.

The brown-eyed man jerked a thumb toward Rudd and said in a satisfied voice:

"That's him!"

THE additional riders stared hard at Rudd. He smiled at them. They looked pleased. Like the first riders, the newcomers were hard-eyed men mounted on very fine horses. Their faces in the white moonlight, except for that brief look of pleasure, seemed cold and vaguely sinister.

"I shore feel obliged to you fellers," Rudd murmured.

"You were a fool to go in that town at all," snapped the brown-eyed man.

Rudd didn't dispute the statement. His manner was alert and watchful while he wondered where the others were riding.

They continued on in silence except for the faint squeaking of saddle leather, the occasional jingle of spur or bit chains. The moon drew a black-cloud handkerchief over its face, as though masking for a hold-up.

"I'm headin' for the Hardaway herd," Rudd told them.

The brown-eyed man growled.

"Of course. But I can't see why yuh changed yore plan to meet us on Hardaway Creek headwater nor why yuh came through Sertain instead. Don't make no difference, though. Anyway, you fix it, the raid on that herd will be easy. Only three punchers are ridin' night herd."

Rudd Lockover froze in his stirrups. Now he understood why he had been rescued! These men were rustlers. They had mistaken him for an evidently important member of their outfit.

Too well he knew that he had been

mistaken for Val Lockover, his cousin, whose resemblance to himself was remarkably close. Val, a reckless outlaw had been reported dead in Sonora.

The news had been a relief to all the kin, especially to Rudd because of the resemblance between them. They had the same height and coloring, the same queer twist to the eyebrows. On both, copper-colored hair grew down in a peak on a wide forehead.

They had the same peculiar ear lobes, too long and too heavy, features precisely alike and voices that were echoes of each other.

Their fathers had married sisters, and those fathers had been twins. Rudd and his outlaw relative had been born in the same week. In each, gray-blue eyes blinked at their first view of life. They had played together as boys, picked up mannerisms from each other. At eighteen the split came. Val threw in with rustlers, became a leader, fled across the Border when things got too hot, was reported dead, now was back again.

Before he fled he had twice tried to ambush Rudd, hating him because of a girl he loved, but who loved Rudd instead. A girl for whom Rudd cared nothing. Her choice had stabbed Val's vanity, roused a vicious enduring hate against Rudd. Later, Val had married another girl only to desert her shortly afterward.

As the five horsemen proceeded along the trail the brown-eyed man began to boast to the two newcomers—evidently recruits in the renegade band—about Val's outlaw exploits.

From the newcomers' questions Rudd learned clearly that Val was to have met them at the little spring which was headwaters for Hardaway Creek. Also, an additional bunch of outlaws, riding half an hour behind Val, were to meet him at the same place as soon as possible.

Well, Val would be at the spring, while Rudd's fellow travelers believed Val here! That spring Rudd knew quite well.

It irked Rudd that he didn't know the brown-eyed man's name and dared not ask it, as that would give Rudd himself away. But by deft and apparently careless probing Rudd learned what details he wanted about Val's present plans. He also learned for sure without probing that Val had been the drygulcher who twice had made attempts on his, Rudd's, life.

The brown-eyed man made a sudden announcement.

"We can cut off several miles by using the new bridge. Flooring ain't down yet, but enough planks laid loose to ride over. Okay, Chief?"

Rudd nodded assent.

Rudd thought, with the sardonic humor frequent in him:

"Dad used to say you can't have too much of a good thing, but too much rescue is worse than none. I only have one gun with five cartridges in it. When trouble starts there won't be any reloading time. Against me are eight tied-down sixes and certain cooperation in wiping me out if they find out who I am. They—"

HIS thoughts were broken by jeering laughter. The brown-eyed man had ridden his horse straight between two slender saplings, only to be stopped by the horse's shoulder which couldn't get through.

"You'd better get them specs, Hook, you near-sighted owl!"

At least Rudd knew the brown-eyed killer's name now. And also knew that the man's defective eyesight had helped him to mistake Rudd for Val, though many a well-sighted person had made the same mistake. The second rescuer had no doubt merely taken Hook's word.

Hook backed out from the trees, cursing, then hastened to turn their attention elsewhere by cantering up to Rudd and announcing loudly:

"Now that yuh've come up here into yore double's section, yuh'd better be shore you do what you said you would—salivate him!"

"Keep yore advice till it's asked," snarled Rudd.

Perplexed and harried as he felt, the check for the herd heavy in his pocket, his tone was so savage that Hook shut up.

As Rudd thought of the new bridge an idea slowly took shape in his mind. It offered a slim chance of survival against these men who would gun him down ruthlessly once his real identity was exposed. And that chance depended on his horse which was a born jumper and trained to do many tricks.

Brown-eyed Hook had fallen back beside a recruit, a sharp-featured man of forty named Swale. Hook began talking loudly about Val's plan to have Rudd die slowly.

Rudd's voice, slightly choked and unhappy, interrupted Hook.

"Fellers, the meal that jailer fed me had sour cabbage. I—I feel kind of—sick. Wait a minute!"

While his companions grinned Rudd shoved his big claybank through a thick fringe of brush, a natural act since a man with an upset stomach doesn't care for an audience.

Then the sound of running hoofs wiped out their grins. A riderless horse galloped into view on their left and well ahead of them. Thinking their leader had sprung from the saddle, letting his mount bolt from him, the renegades spurred after the runaway.

Before them lay an open bit of sward. Beyond yawned a long fissure, an offshoot from the low canyon the new bridge spanned. They were just in time to see the claybank skim over the narrow abyss. The animal landed safely, accomplishing a jump that left them breathless with admiration.

"What a jump!" gasped Hook. "Val's horse shore did bolt!"

"You idiot, you rescued the wrong man!" yelled Swale as the claybank sped along the far side and a rider suddenly climbed into view and got back in the saddle. "That jasper must be Rudd, Val's double, and he was hangin' to the far side of his hoss."

Swale punctuated his loud shouting with a volley of shots from his roaring six-gun. None of the bullets found their mark and Rudd vanished behind some chaparral, angling toward the new bridge.

"Ride for the bridge!" Swale yelled. "If it ain't too far maybe we can catch him from this side!"

DAZED and distracted, his mind milling over all he had spilled to the wrong Lockover, yet hardly sure Swale was right, Hook galloped for the bridge, the others speeding with him.

"Those bridge planks are loose!" Swale yelled. "Rudd may try to toss them into the canyon. We've got to beat him to it."

Swale's fears proved to be partly justified for when Hook and his companions arrived at the bridge they saw that Rudd had removed one entire section of boards. Originally two planks wide, all that was left was a single-plank span twelve inches wide which no horse could safely use.

On the other side of the unfinished trestle rose a short, ragged rampart of loose stone. From this a voice called derisively.

"I'll take yuh one at a time, gentlemen, if yuh'll each meet me on the bridge!" challenged Rudd Lockover. "But you stay out of it, Hook."

Swale dismounted, his face savage in wicked anticipation. "Come ahead. I won't draw till yuh count three after yuh step on the bridge. You do the same and fold yore arms."

One of the other outlaws called low-voiced to Swale. "I'll try to pick him off while he walks toward yuh."

"And likely hit *me* in the back, yuh blasted fool!" snarled Swale. "Leave it to me. I'll get him."

The two tall figures stepped out on the bridge, the hard white moonlight picking them out as they came slowly forward, arms folded.

"One!" counted Rudd.

Without warning Swale's hand darted to his hip and brought up his gun. He thumbed one wild shot, the hot lead fanning past Rudd's ear with an ominous, buzzing sound. Half-expecting such a treacherous move, Rudd's own hand dug for his holster in a blur of speed, brought his Colt into play.

He snapped a shot at Swale, saw his bullet strike Swale's face. Afterward, the outlaw fell forward, hit the edge of the planking, rolled off and plunged into space. At the same moment one of Swale's companions came charging across the trestle intent on cutting down Rudd.

Behind that outlaw Hook and the fourth man prepared to throw in their chips. The fourth man, named Lobo, growled at Hook.

"Come on, Hook. Rudd's too good for one man. He's downed Swale and he may get Kroner. We'll make a dash. I'll take the plank. You hang to the left railing, run from timber to timber and fire at him."

"No!" Hook protested in sudden fear. "I can't see well enough."

Lobo, already running toward the first plank whirled upon Hook. His gun lifted and crashed.

"Yuh blasted coward. Maybe yuh can see to die, then!"

Hook collapsed on the edge of the precipice while Lobo, both guns out, charged onto the trestle. Directly ahead of him Kroner chopped a shot at Rudd's menacing, weaving figure. Lead burned across the top of Rudd's right shoulder bringing a sharp jolt of pain. He staggered, but kept on, shifting his Colt to his left hand.

Rudd's gun roared savagely and Kroner, shot in the chest, crashed through the guard railing and plunged into the canyon. Then Rudd was facing Lobo's twin blazing Colts.

A bullet sent his hat bouncing from his head. Quickly, inexorably, his gun centered Lobo and flamed.

Lobo ...ed as if a hand had been thrust in front of his face. He went up on tiptoes, then followed Swale in a death-drop into the gorge.

Rudd heaved a sigh of relief. The first section of Val Lockover's rustler outfit had been wiped out. But there was still work to be done and he realized he was not yet out of danger.

FASHIONING a crude bandage on his shoulder to stop the bleeding, Rudd raced back to the claybank, mounted and rode away from the bridge.

He pushed on at a steady pace, anxious to reach the Hardaway herd and warn the night riders of Val Lockover's plan to raid the beef.

Now and then, in the moonlight, a coyote fled before him like a soundless shadow. At last one of these, speeding from human contact, ran into a wide gully where a small spring murmured musically. The animal whirled at the sight of a rider waiting there, then ran out and crouched under a small squat cedar.

Rudd's pulse quickened and his nerves began to tighten. He spurred boldly into the ravine and halted. In the bright white light the two Lockovers stared at each other, each man's gaze hardening, his lids narrowing.

Rudd had learned from Hook that he, in his rôle of Val Lockover, should have headed for this little spring. There the four Rudd had dealt with were to have met Val.

Having learned the trail Val would take and also the one his other riders would be obliged to follow, and knowing Val would be at the spring half an hour ahead of them, Rudd decided he could settle his long score with the double who wanted so earnestly to kill him and still have time to warn the herders.

He didn't figure Val for a coward. His ambushing proclivities sprang from Val's idea that in a private war a man should kill his enemy the quickest and safest way he can; but Rudd had heard enough, and in his youthful day had seen enough, of Val to know

that if cornered he was a cold, sinister fighter.

Rudd was not cold. Rage boiled in him now at sight of this ice-blooded man who had repeatedly tried to murder him.

Val drawled, his voice strangely like Rudd's: "Well, if it isn't my law-and-order, tophand cousin Rudd!"

Rudd made no answer. He forced down his fury and set himself to watching Val from head to heel. Val was as fast in surprise movements as a big cat and just as treacherous.

Val eased himself in the saddle, throwing his weight carelessly on one foot. He took out a cigarette case, a souvenir from a stage hold-up.

"Have a smoke, Rudd?"

Rudd said nothing.

"You know, Rudd, it's well I respect our kinship. Because if I were greedy I could have yuh killed and turn in yore body through a friend, who'd collect the large reward out for me."

"Fool talk!" Rudd's tones were biting with scorn and contempt. "You know a dozen sheriffs have memorized yore identifying body marks. That big birth-mark coiled on yore thigh. That scar under your left breast. You think yuh'll hold me by palavering till yore riders come up and back yuh!"

"Now wait, Rudd. I've begun to be sorry for the plays I've made. I want to be friends again and—"

Under cover of the smooth lies Val made a lightning draw.

ONLY his intense alertness saved Rudd. Warily watching for the faintest hint of movement, his gun-hand moved faster than any eye could have followed. The half second Val took to get his gun out Rudd used in firing from his hip over the shoulder of a horse trained to stand it.

Red flame from both forty-fives slashed into the silver moonlight. But Val's hammer fell as he was toppling to the ground. Val's bullet, meant for Rudd's heart cut a flesh wound on his thigh.

Rudd sprang down, knelt beside Val, but his treacherous cousin was dead.

"I must get to the night herders, pronto, before Val's riders come up and raid the beef on their own hook when they find he's dead," thought the cowboy.

He remounted hurriedly, buckling on Val's cartridge belt with its hand-tooled holsters and fancy guns with ivory butts.

He had scarcely gained the hull when Val's horse bolted toward a bunch of riders suddenly filling the mouth of the ravine.

"You all right, Chief?" called one of the men, his gun fisted and wavering uncertainly.

A feeling of hopelessness hit Rudd when he saw there were six men in the band. Against such odds he wouldn't stand a chance. But now because there was no other way he played his only card—a desperate one fraught with peril, but which might fool them.

He charged at them. There was an opening between the outlaws on the left and the ravine wall. As he charged he shouted:

"I'm okay! Catch my horse! Pick up Hook and follow!"

Outriding the loose horse, he went by the men like a cannon ball, yelling those orders.

Bewildered, uneasy, the outlaws rushed their mounts up the ravine, one of them catching Val's horse.

Reaching the body, they stared down, gaping.

Val had just given them orders. Yet Val lay dead here.

A lean, rangy rustler slid like an eel from his saddle, tore open the dead man's clothes, looked up at his mates from where he knelt:

"This is the real Val, hombres. We've been tricked. That other jigger was Rudd, Val's cousin. Blast that Rudd! We could have cut him to ribbons!"

The renegade's speech trailed off into a string of curses.

BEYOND the ravine, under a quiet, moon-silvered sky, the Hardaway punchers watched the cattle gathered in for tomorrow's sale. The bedded down herd slept contentedly while the night hawks sang rough range songs.

When Rudd galloped up in a cloud of dust the herders stopped singing and crowded around him.

Rudd told his story briefly, adding bitterly:

"When the six start a fight with us, we can down 'em, but it'll scatter the herd all over the brakes and ravines."

"They won't start a fight," an experienced rider said. "When yuh salivated Val, yuh killed the mainspring of that outlaw bunch. He brought 'em luck. He was their brains. For all they know, yuh might have gone to the Hardaway ranch for reinforcements so they'd have not only us four but maybe a dozen men to fight.

"I'll bet the skunks will loot Val's body and burn the wind for parts unknown."

This proved true. Dawn broke on a peaceful scene. At the Hardaway ranchhouse Rudd's flesh wounds were tended. He breakfasted, closed the deal with Marvin Arp, the dandified heir, then sardonically grinned at Sheriff Prentice and his brother, Al, as they rode up.

The sheriff snarled, seeing the chance to buy was gone:

"The jailer said some men took you out of jail, Rudd. I shore hoped it was a lynchin' bee!"

Rudd grinned again, then curtly informed the sheriff of all that had occurred.

"Reckon I'm entitled to five hundred dollars reward out for Val dead or alive, Sheriff," he concluded. "But you can ride over to the hollow, pack his body to the coroner, take half of the reward and send the other half to the wife Val deserted."

When the purchased herd had passed, grumbling and lowing, into Brocage pastures, when the Hardaway riders with it had gone to other jobs, Rudd reported in full to his owner.

John Brocage's fierce hawk face softened when he shook Rudd's hand.

"Though yuh'll be mighty young for the job," he said, "I think that in two years when Jackson retires, I can risk making yuh foreman, Rudd. Plenty men are brave, but have no brains. Yuh've got courage and brains mixed in that copper-thatched head of yores."

*Three exciting Complete Novelets Next Issue:* COLTMAN FROM NOWHERE, by JOE ARCHIBALD—SHORT TRIGGER MEN, *by* TOM GUNN—*and* WYOMING JUSTICE, *by* ORLANDO RIGONI

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***A Complete Buffalo Billy Bates Novelet***

'Out into the clearing came a buckskin-clad rider, a six-gun glinting in his hand. "Hoist 'em, you mangy wolves!" he barked

# SCOUT FROM FORT FLINTLOCK

## By SCOTT CARLETON

*Facing deadly human sidewinders on the Oregon Trail, a fighting rider makes bullets and arrows talk the language of justice!*

### CHAPTER I

*Idaho Indian Crisis*

AN EARLY spring was melting the snow in the Idaho forests, and as winter gathered up its white robes to make its departure, Indian tribes began tuning their war drums, and powwows were held north of the Snake River and west of the Rocky Mountain divide.

Thawing snows broke up ice-locked rivers and caused landslides which blocked the trails and wagon roads upon which the encroaching whites depended for supplies. After a hard, snowbound winter, the hated palefaces who had settled on various offshoots of the Oregon Trail would undoubtedly be short of food and gunpowder. The time was ripe for an Indian uprising.

Chief Black Elk of the fierce Blackfoot tribe was fanning the fires of rebellion among the Nez Perces, the Flatheads and the Walla Wallas. Here was an opportunity for the red nations to daub on paint, don war-

bonnets, sharpen tomahawks and hit the bloody massacre trail.

Black Elk's runners had been making secret medicine at the various tribal camps deep in the Sawtooths and the Smokies. Braves were whetting their scalping knives and restringing bows along the Boise and the Payette Rivers.

Breech-clouted, moccasined braves were poised to strike, and Pinecone Valley, northernmost of the Oregon Trail tributary settlements, was first in line for destruction.

Only one thing barred the Indians from destroying the log cabins of the pioneers scattered along the fertile banks of the Boise River—just one obstacle lay between Black Elk and the livestock, rifles, blankets and scalps which the white settlements would yield. That one barrier was the stockaded blockhouse at the junction of Elkhorn Creek and the Boise, the United States Army outpost of Fort Flintlock.

Once the Fort Flintlock garrison was wiped out, all of Pinecone Valley would be ripe for plucking, and beyond that lay the scattered Oregon Trail settlements.

The Indians had undisputed superiority of numbers. The three elements they lacked—rifles and gunpowder and lead—were being supplied by unknown traders, believed to be white renegades posing as trappers in the foothills of the Sawtooths.

Armed with Sharps' rifles and loaned false courage from the trade whiskey which the renegades were peddling, Chief Black Elk and his fierce Blackfoot bucks were ready to strike a death-blow to the Flintlock troops.

Such was the grim picture which Major Aubrey Fletcher, commander of Fort Flintlock, painted for Buffalo Billy Bates when he called the buckskin-clad scout into his office.

"If we can learn when and where Chief Black Elk intends to strike," Major Fletcher said gravely, "I believe we can hold off an attack until we receive reinforcements from Fort Hall and Walla Walla. I have decided to send you out on this scouting mission, Buffalo Billy, despite your youth and the fact that you are more or less unfamiliar with the Idaho country."

BUFFALO BILLY BATES remained silent, waiting for Major Fletcher to issue definite orders.

Born and bred in the Taos country of far-off New Mexico, young Bates had been accustomed to rigorous desert life for eighteen of his twenty-one years. Since he had come under the wing of Colonel William F. Cody, Bates' pursuits had carried him out of the cactus country.

For the past two months, he had been living at Fort Flintlock. He had been sent there at the personal behest of Buffalo Bill Cody, so that he might acquaint himself with a locale which was strange to him—evergreen forests, towering glacier-caked peaks, and icy streams so alien to his New Mexican background.

Bates had been an apt student of the veteran army scouts at Fort Flintlock. He had learned the knack of walking on snowshoes, how to burrow into drifts to escape freezing in blizzards, how to trap beaver, mink, grizzly bears and Idaho panthers—animals so vastly different from the sidewinders, coyotes, armadillos and other fauna he had studied amid the cactus and lava beds of the Taos region.

And now, from the ranks of Fort Flintlock's scouts, Bates had been called for a secret conference with his commandant.

"Fifty miles up the Boise," Major Fletcher continued, "in the crotch between the two peaks of Cat-Ear Mountain, lives a fur trapper who should know the size of Black Elk's forces, and the location of the Blackfoot camp from which an attack would start.

"His name is Earless Ed Patterson. If any man in Idaho knows where Black Elk is obtaining guns and powder and shot, Earless Ed Patterson is that man."

Fletcher ceased his nervous pacing of the log-walled room and wheeled to stare at the scout he had summoned before him.

Buffalo Billy was dressed in a doeskin hunting jacket and buckskin pants, with beaded moccasins encasing his feet. Slung over his brawny shoulders was a chokeberry bow and an otterskin quiver loaded with iron-tipped arrows, for Bates had been indulging in practise with these weapons, when summoned to Fletcher's office.

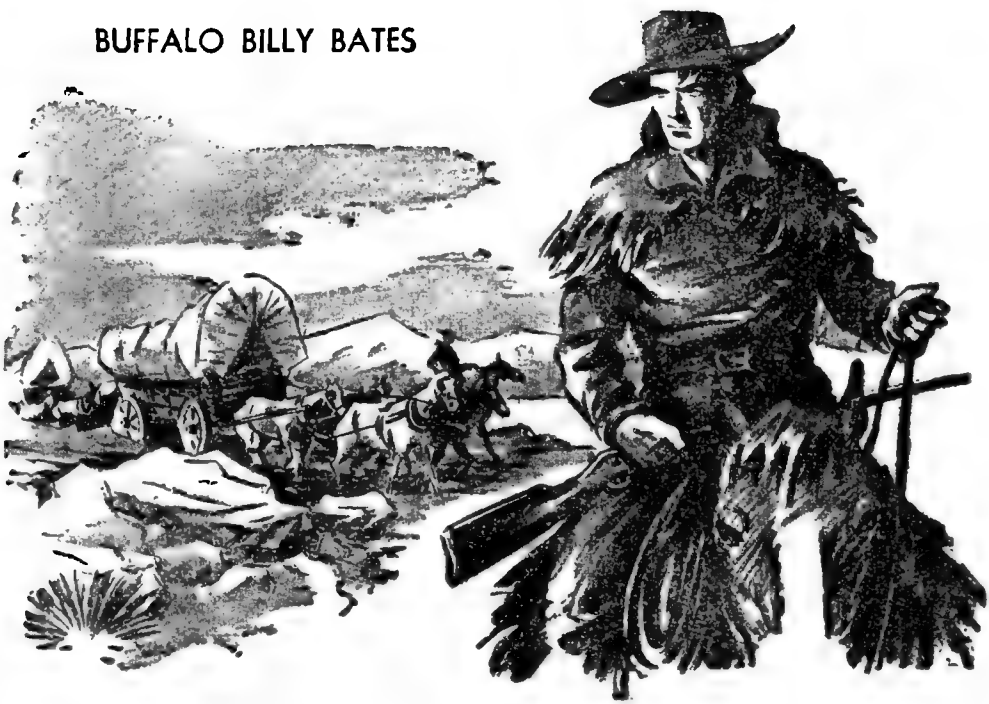
His hair was sorrel brown and nearly shoulder-long, setting off his tawny eyes and sun-coppered complexion. The latter had been a product of burning desert suns below the Cimarron.

His Southwest background was evidenced, too, in that flat-crowned beaver Stetson he wore in lieu of the coonskin caps of his Idaho companions.

A .45-caliber Dragoon Colt was belted at his waist, a gift from Colonel Cody on his twenty-first birthday. He carried a brass powder flask, which he had deliberately permitted to corrode so that its metal would not gleam in the sun. A bowie knife and buckskin shot-pouch hung from the same belt.

These details Fletcher took in with a sweeping gaze, and he nodded approvingly.

"It is only fair to warn you, Bates," the Fort Flintlock commander went on, "that a trip up to Earless Ed's cabin on Cat-Ear Mountain would carry you into the heart of Blackfoot territory. You might lose your hair the moment you get out of Pinecone Valley. But the fate of Fort Flintlock and the lives of hundreds of men and women may depend on what you learn on this expedition. You can refuse this detail if you wish, and I will



not think the less of your courage."

Bates stood up, a smile flashing across his ruggedly handsome face. He saluted briskly.

"My hoss is champing at the bit out in the stable, sir. Tell me how to reach Cat-Ear Mountain, and I'll be on my way."

THE second afternoon after Buffalo Billy Bates left Fort Flintlock, he came in sight of the twin-peaked mountain which formed a flank of the Sawtooth Range and which bore the unmistakable outlines of a cat's head.

Up in the saddle between those two crags would be the snow-hidden cabin of Earless Ed Patterson, who in addition to running his trap lines was acting as an undercover scout for Major Fletcher.

Breaking out of a tangle of rock maple and scrub cottonwood, Buffalo Billy Bates reined up his Morgan saddler as he found further progress blocked by the surging waters of the Boise River.

Two miles beyond that snow-fed, roaring river was his destination, Cat-Ear Mountain. But reaching it might cost him his life. There were no bridges in this untamed wilderness, and the spring flood, filling the river-bed from bank to bank, made fording impossible.

"We got to get across, old boy," Bates told his pony. "This river won't be any harder to swim than the Cimarron or the Platte have been. The quicker we get to the east bank, the quicker we'll be out of the open where a redskin could ambush us. So let's get goin'."

Foxtrotting forward at the gentle prick of steel rowels along his flanks, the big-chested Morgan plunged out into the swift-moving stream.

Buffalo Billy barely had time to shuck his Sharps .50 rifle from the boot under the *rosadero* when the Morgan's hoofs lost bottom and they were swimming.

*Zzzzt!* Something whined like a hornet past Bates' ear, just as he was slipping out of saddle and grasping the horn.

The hairs on Bates' neck-nape prickled as he saw the quivering, feather-tipped shaft of a Blackfoot arrow imbedded in the swellfork pommel. That arrow would have skewered his body as a hatpin would a bug, if he had not left the stirrups when he did!

Momentarily helpless, a heavy buffalo gun in his left hand and his right clinging to the reins and saddle horn, the young Indian scout swiveled his head toward the opposite bank of the river, in the direction from which the shaft had come.

A blood-curdling w a r - w h o o p helped guide Bates' glance to the source of his peril.

Fifty yards downstream, an Indian dugout canoe of red cedar was shoving out from a copse of willow brake on the west bank. In the prow of the canoe was a Blackfoot chief in bannering, eagle-feathered head-dress and full war regalia.

A paint-daubed warrior, naked except for a breech clout and a single feather jutting from his scalplock, was thrusting the canoe out into the Boise with powerful strokes of a maple paddle.

Even as he watched, Buffalo Billy Bates saw the chief's coppery arm dart behind his shoulder to pluck another arrow from the quiver thonged against his spine, and nock the shaft to a big war-bow.

WITH a snarl of rage, Bates let go his Sharps and let it sink. He released his grip on the saddle horn and began swimming, crowding close to the Morgan.

The current was sweeping them past the canoe which angled out toward mid-river. Another dozen heartbeats, and Bates' head would be exposed to the Blackfoot bowman, an easy target.

The Morgan's hoofs churned hard against the rush of the icy waters, and it veered away from Buffalo Billy to escape a hurtling fir stump borne along on the crest of the flood.

A soul-chilling yell came from the Indian chief's lips as he loosed his bowstring. Like a shaft of light, the barbed arrow sped straight at the swimming white man.

Sucking his lungs full of air, Buffalo Billy Bates dived. The arrow drilled the ripples where his head had been an instant before.

A yell of triumph came from the Blackfoot chief, as his flinty eyes swept the sun-sparkling water to spot Bates when he was forced to the surface.

Expertly, the buck in the rear of the canoe paddled toward the spot where the white man had gone under. The chief, snarling an order at his paddle man, reached in the bottom of the dugout and picked up a rusty muzzle-loader.

Eyes scanning the muddy water in the vicinity of the swimming horse, the redskins were caught by surprise when, a moment later, a pair of dripping brown arms knifed above the surface alongside the canoe and seized the gunwale.

Swimming under water, the buckskin-clad scout from Fort Flintlock had seen the dark bulk of the cedar canoe pass over him. Now, lunging all his weight against the dugout, Buffalo Billy Bates staked everything on capsizing the Indian craft.

Water rushed over the gunwale as the war-bonneted chief, yelling like a madman, lost his balance and plunged overboard. The naked warrior dropped his paddle and clawed a scalping knife from his breechclout, as he found himself face to face with the grim-faced white man.

Then the dugout capsized, a second after the paddle man, knife blade flashing in the sun, leaped toward Buffalo Billy Bates. A copper-red arm circled the scout's neck in a throttling strangle-hold.

Stabbing murderously, the Indian was carried under as Bates scissored his legs around the buck's middle and the icy waters of the flood-swollen river closed over their heads.

## CHAPTER II

### *Blackfoot Campfire*

LOCKED in a death struggle, white man and redskin were buffeted like driftwood under the angry current.

Impeded by the drag of the water, the Blackfoot warrior's knife arm had not yet plunged home with the steel scalping blade in his fist. But death by drowning was a more threatening menace, as the warrior's elbow increased the pressure about Bates' throat.

Groping toward his belt with cold-numbed fingers, Buffalo Billy lifted his bowie knife from its scabbard. The questing fingers of his left hand sank home in the warrior's throat, and as they hit the river botton, Bates was on top.

Bubbles streamed from the Indian's mouth as he wriggled free of Bates' choking grasp. They broke apart in a roil of mud, and the current bowled them over.

Staking all on a single thrust of his bowie, Buffalo Billy Bates struck out for the surface, following the elusive redskin,

The eight-inch blade struck yielding flesh, slid deep between two ribs to find the Blackfoot's heart.

Blood dyed the muddy waters, and the scalping knife slipped from the red man's hand.

An instant later, Bates' head broke the surface in a smother of foam. He got a momentary glimpse of the Indians' naked back rolling up into the

sunlight, as he tugged the knife out of the Blackfoot's ribs.

Gasping for breath, choking river water from his nostrils and windpipe, the buckskin-clad scout swam closer to the rolling body of the Indian, knife poised for another thrust if his foe showed signs of fight.

But the warrior had gone to the Happy Hunting Ground.

A floating log blocked out Bates' view of the dead Indian, a second before the warrior's water-filled lungs carried him to the bottom in a cloud of blood-stained water.

Spent and gasping, the scout grabbed a protruding root, welcoming the buoyant log as a chance for concealment and support while he rested his aching legs.

His sombrero was hanging from the back of his head from the rawhide lanyard around his chin. Staring about under the sopping brim, Buffalo Billy Bates located the Blackfoot chieftain who had so nearly killed him with an arrow.

The chief, his bedraggled war bonnet floating some distance away, had succeeded in grabbing the tail of Bates' Morgan, and the horse was towing him ashore on the opposite bank.

Bates cursed disgustedly as he saw the chief, dripping like a soused rat, scramble out on the muddy rim, still clinging to the Morgan's tail. Before the gasping chief could scan the surface of the river, the current swept Bates and his floating log around a bend.

Gravel bottom scraped at the scout's moccasin soles, and he let go his grip on the driftlog and waded through armpit-deep ice water to gain the bank, sixty yards or more downstream from the spot where the Indian chief had left the river.

CRAWLING through knee-high reeds and brush, Buffalo Billy Bates flung himself down on a sheltered mud bank to rest. His short, furious struggle with the buck had taken a grim toll of his vitality.

But even while he rested, Bates was not idle. He sheathed his bowie and removed his Dragoon Colt from its holster, took it apart and blew silt and water from the bore and cylinder.

Then he removed the percussion caps and replaced them with fresh ones from his waterproof pouch. His bronze powder flask was tightly-corked, so he knew his supply of gunpowder was intact after its submersion. Convinced that his six-gun was in shooting order, Bates peeled off his hunting jacket and wrung water from the soaked deerhide.

Then he crawled on all fours up the crest of the bank and got to his feet in dense undergrowth.

He paused there, nostrils questing the wind like a dog, his ears strained to catch sounds which would indicate the location of the Blackfoot chief.

Distinctly to his ears came the sound of his Morgan, trumpeting water from its muzzle. Then came a series of grunts from the Indian, off ahead through the trees, followed by the creak of wet saddle leather.

"That redskin aims to steal my hoss, eh?" muttered Bates, his jaw outthrust grimly. "I had to lose my buffalo gun, but I ain't honin' to let no Blackfoot make off with my saddler."

Gun in hand, its knurled hammer eared back to full cock in instant readiness for a shoot-out, Bates slithered through the snow-hung underbrush, nerves twanging with eagerness to close in with the chief.

Then he froze stockstill and knelt on one knee, as he heard the Indian yell something in his tribal jargon. From his brief study of the Blackfoot dialect, down in Fort Boise, Bates knew what the Indian said, and it brought a cold grin to his lips.

"Yellin' for his canoe paddler. He'll wait a long time before he gets an answer—unless I send that chief to the Happy Huntin' Grounds where his pardner is."

Dead silence reigned in the forest for a full minute. Then Bates heard his Morgan's steel-shod hoofs slogging off in an up-stream direction, as the chief apparently gave up his henchman for lost.

Desperation kindled in Bates' veins as he found the going hard in the brambles. He lost valuable time locating the game trail, where hoofprints revealed the direction the Blackfoot had traveled.

Hurrying forward, realizing that he might overtake the Indian riding his horse around the next bend of the trail, Buffalo Billy Bates' water-soaked moccasins made no sound on the slushy carpet of snow-crusted fir needles.

The trail branched off from the river. Deer and elk had worn this path through the underbrush, on their way to the Boise to drink. Indians made use of game trails wherever possible, and Bates' heart leaped as he realized that his manhunt might well carry him to the Blackfoots' secret camp. If so, a big part of his mission out of Fort Flintlock would be achieved by keeping to the chief's trail.

TEN minutes later, Bates halted as he rounded a sharp bend of the trail and came in view of a shady clearing, hemmed in by firs and hemlock which, in their snowy raiment, resembled white wigwams.

The Indian had tied the Morgan to a sapling, and was squatting over a small fire built previously against a rocky outcrop on the opposite side of the clearing. This, then, must have been the Indians' camp. They did their traveling by canoe.

Withdrawing into the brush to think things over and make sure other Indians were not lurking in the neighborhood, Buffalo Billy Bates tried to worry out a solution to several questions which had been nagging at him.

Why had the Indians brought their dugout to this secluded spot, in the first place? It was not a war canoe, such as the northwestern red men used to transport warriors rapidly to the scene of battle. Such canoes were long and streamlined, built for speed, and often thirty feet long.

The canoe Bates had overturned was little more than a hollowed-out log, with blunt ends. In its belly Indians could stow vast amounts of buffalo hides or other freight. Yet the sunken canoe had been empty.

Another thing, tribal chiefs, as important as Bates' foe appeared to be, judging from his bear-claw necklaces and beaded breech-clout and heavy warbonnet—paraphernalia worn only by top-ranking chiefs, not petty leaders or medicine men—would hardly choose a clumsy freight-carrying dugout for their personal canoe.

The evidence added up to one thing, and that conclusion set Buffalo Billy's heart to pumping: a big chief, riding in a freight dugout with a single paddleman, must have been engaged on a mission of prime importance.

The chief must have been planning to pick up a load of important material somewhere along the Boise—a cargo so vital that its receipt depended upon a tribal chief's presence in the dugout.

In this neck of the woods, with war drums beginning to rumble in the Blackfoot country, such a cargo could only be guns and gunpowder, purchased from renegade whites, even as the commander at Fort Flintlock feared.

"That means I got to nab this redskin alive, instead of pluggin' him and investigatin' later. Billy Bates, you're goin' to fetch a live Injun back to Fort Flintlock, or die tryin'!"

Holstering his six-gun, Bates drew his hunting bow off his shoulder, fitted an iron-tipped arrow to the string, and slithered back to the edge of the clearing.

The chief was still warming his hands at the fire, poking the coals with a root to make the fuel blaze up and, Indianlike, keep the smoke at a minimum. Though this was the heart

of his own country, this chief was handling a fire with the innate caution of a red man.

*Whing!* An arrow thudded into the campfire, spraying hot coals over the Indian's painted chest.

The chief bounced to his feet and clawed a scalp-hung tomahawk from his belt.

BUFFALO BILLY BATES came striding into the sunlight which shafted down through the trees. With magical speed, the wiry young scout had nocked another arrow to his bow. The Indian realized that the first shaft had been loosed as a warning, and could just as well have sunk home in his temple.

"Drop hatchet, Chief!" rasped Bates, speaking in his rusty version of the Blackfoot tongue. "I count double coup on Injun if you fight!"

Despair gleamed in the Blackfoot's beady eyes, but no fear. Acknowledging the paleface's mastery of the situation, the chief dropped his tomahawk and folded his arms, in the redskin's equivalent of raising his arms in surrender.

"The white scout speaks with a single tongue," acknowledged the chief. "You are a mighty hunter, paleface. Black Elk is your game."

Buffalo Billy's jaw sagged in amazement at the Indian's words. He halted midway to the campfire, his bow and arrow still held in readiness for a tricky move.

"You—you are Chief Black Elk?" he demanded incredulously. "You are the great foe of the White Father?"

Black Elk nodded with dignity.

A slow grin broke the tautness of Bates' face. This, indeed, was luck beyond his wildest dreams. Cavalry officers had hunted for years to track down this wily, bloodthirsty Indian leader. With Black Elk himself a prisoner at Fort Flintlock, the backbone of Indian trouble here in Idaho would be broken.

Bates circled the Indian's campfire warily, studying the ground for sign. There were a few moccasin tracks about, but they belonged to two sets of footgear only.

This, then, was no concentration of warriors; it was where Black Elk and his canoe man had camped the night before, no doubt. They had gone down to the river to launch their canoe when Bates had attempted his crossing of the Boise.

Halting at arm's length from the motionless chief, Bates returned arrow to quiver, slung the bow over his shoulder, and reached for the pistol at his belt, intending to use a white man's thunder-stick as a persuader in the powwow he intended to have with Black Elk.

But the gun never came from holster. In that instant, something hammered against the back of Billy Bates' skull like a mule's kick, and the scout's senses were smashed into black oblivion before he sprawled, unconscious, at Black Elk's feet.

"Heap good!" grunted the Indian in English, as he stooped to unpry Bates' fingers from his Colt butt. "You come in time, white brother Kerr!"

## CHAPTER III

### *Gun-running Renegades*

THE brush at the far side of the clearing parted, to reveal a towering, black-whiskered fur trapper, wearing a buffalo coat and hob-nailed boots.

"Rawhide" Kerr, a Renegade known for his treachery ever since he had sold out an Oregon-bound covered wagon train to the red men two years before, and who had gained the status of a squaw-man through his marriage with a Nez Perce woman up on the Snake, strode across the clearing and stooped to retrieve the hatchet he had flung at

Buffalo Billy Bates' head.

The flat blade of the hatchet had struck the scout's temple. Otherwise the razor-sharp blade would have chopped open his skull like a melon.

"How, Black Elk!" rumbled Kerr, making an Indian sign of greeting to the chief. "You in heap bad trouble, eh?"

The Indian scowled, staring off behind Kerr. He was in time to see a Hunkpapa pony, driven by a half-breed, come slogging out of the forest, dragging a travois of peeled poles.

On the travois was a bundle of marten pelts and a wooden crate marked "United States Army, Fort Flintlock, Idaho Ter."

Behind the horse-drawn conveyance stepped two more men—a shaggy-bearded French-Canadian trapper and a slim-built American with a pair of snowshoes slung over his back. The latter man wore the yellow-striped blue uniform of the Eighth Cavalry Corps from Fort Flintlock.

Kerr rolled Billy Bates over with a prodding boot toe and glanced up at the Army man quizzically.

"This one o' Flintlock's scouts, Jenson?" he demanded.

"Sandy" Jenson cuffed back his flat-brimmed Army hat, on which was pinned the bronze insignia of a quartermaster, and stared thoughtfully at Bates' contorted face. A thread of blood was trickling from the scout's temple, where Kerr's axe had connected.

"Not one of our scouts, no," Jenson grunted, running splayed fingers through his shock of wheat-colored hair. "But I've seen this jasper. He's Buffalo Billy Bates, Colonel Cody's sidekick. The major sent him out a few days ago to get a line on the Blackfeet, to see if they were preparing to go on the warpath."

Rawhide Kerr's harsh guffaw broke off short as he saw Black Elk whip out a scalping knife and kneel down to place the steel blade against Buffalo Billy's forehead. Lashing out a booted foot, Kerr kicked the chief's arm aside even as Black Elk was twining his fingers through Bates' leonine shock of hair.

"Plenty of time to count coup on this walloper after he comes to, Chief!" gruffed the renegade, addressing Black Elk in the Indian's own language. "I'm honin' to find out if Major Fletcher suspects me of gun-runnin' an' firewater peddlin'. Bates will be able to tell me."

Black Elk got to his feet with a grumbling protest. Kerr turned toward the French-Canadian trapper who was warming his frost-bitten hands at the Indian's fire.

"Hogtie Bates and rub snow on his face, Canuck," he rasped curtly. "That scout's goin' to spill what he knows before Black Elk scalps him."

"CANUCK" grunted and walked over to the travois to get a coil of rawhide-pleated rope. While Jenson and the half-breed horse tender looked on, the trapper proceeded to truss Buffalo Billy's arms behind his back and knot his legs securely from knees to ankles.

That done, Canuck trudged off into the underbrush, pawed down a double handful of crusty snow, and proceeded to scour Bates' blood-smeared face vigorously.

Black Elk, mixing his Blackfoot jargon with sign language, was recounting their attack on Buffalo Billy Bates out in mid-river, when the young American's eyes fluttered open and he sat up, shaking his head groggily.

Out of a black void of oblivion, Bates stared about him. He drew his eyes into focus on a pair of cavalry boots, and his gaze wandered upward to fix on Sandy Jenson.

"You!" whispered the scout hoarsely. "You're the quartermaster at Fort Flintlock!"

The traitor smiled crookedly.

"That's right, Bates. I'm in charge o' the ordnance and supply depart-

ment at the fort. You ain't thinkin' you'll have a chance to report me to the commandant, do you? Take a look around, son, and you'll have another think comin'!"

White-faced as he absorbed the full brunt of Sandy Jenson's jeering words, Buffalo Billy surveyed the camp site dazedly. He saw sun-rays winking on Black Elk's scalping knife, the leering face of Canuck, the half-breed holding the flea-bitten horse, which was nuzzling his own Morgan beyond the campfire, and then Bates focused his attention on Rawhide Kerr.

Something about Kerr's swaggering manner told Bates that the black-whiskered man in the buffalo hide coat was the leader of this set-up. But it was not until Kerr spoke that he realized the full gravity of his situation.

"Rawhide Kerr, at yore service, Bates!" taunted the squawman jarringly. "That name mean anything to ye?"

Straining at his rawhide-pinioned arms, Buffalo Billy Bates nodded. Rawhide Kerr! He had been warned at Fort Flintlock to keep his eyes peeled for the notorious squawman.

Major Fletcher, going on surmise alone, had suggested that Rawhide Kerr, ostensibly a trapper working his lines up in the Sawtooths, might be the renegade back of the gun-smuggling to the Blackfoot tribe.

Now, spotting the travois loaded with a rifle crate and a load of pelts bound up in an Army blanket, Bates believed he knew the worst. But slight good that knowledge would do him, now, trapped by impossibly superior odds, in the heart of hostile Indian country. It was doubtful if white men would even lay eyes on his wolf-cleaned bones, when the spring thaws were over. . . .

"Yeah, I've heard o' you, Kerr. Your name's something that decent men spit between their teeth, all along the Oregon Trail. Rawhide Kerr, the squawman. Rawhide Kerr, who sold out a wagon train to the 'Rapahoes."

With a cruel laugh, Kerr strode over to the travois and hauled off the big wooden crate. With his hatchet blade, he pried open the box lid and drew forth a shiny new Army rifle.

"Here you are, Black Elk," Kerr gruffed out. "Two dozen late-issue rifles. And plenty more cached an hour's tramp from here."

BLACK ELK'S eyes flashed with excitement, rare in an Indian stoically schooled not to betray his emotions, as he took the rifle from Kerr's hands.

"Powder and shot?" inquired the Indian. "Red man not able to use thundersticks without powder and shot. Gun heap good. Injun can use gun. Ugh! But gun no good without—"

"I'll see that you get plenty of ammunition, Black Elk," Sandy Jenson cut in harshly. "Tell him that, Kerr. I don't speak his lingo."

Buffalo Billy Bates settled back in a prostrate position, despair coursing through him as he listened to Kerr acting as the traitorous soldier's interpreter.

The Blackfoot warriors, it appeared from Black Elk's talk, were prepared to attack Fort Flintlock at any time. Sandy Jenson, being in charge of the garrison's powder magazine, had devised a diabolically clever plot to cripple the fort defenses and supply the attacking Indians with ammunition.

Working secretly, the quartermaster had loaded powder kegs with raw charcoal, which resembled gunpowder in appearance but which, of course, would be like so much sawdust when used in a cannon or rifle.

"The night before your Indians are ready to attack the fort," Jenson explained to the chief through the medium of his interpreter, Rawhide Kerr, "I will have two canoe loads of gunpowder kegs waiting at the bend of the river below the fort. It will be ample to provide your warriors' guns."

The attack, in typical Blackfoot fashion, would be made without warning at sunrise. But Fort Flintlock's outnumbered defenders would find themselves with kegs of worthless charcoal instead of gunpowder.

In all his career along the Frontier, Buffalo Billy Bates had never heard a murder plot so monstrous as the one Sandy Jenson had concocted.

"There is a tunnel between the fort's stockade and the river," Jensen explained. "It was dug secretly, to use as a means of escape in case of siege. The recent floods have made it possible to float canoes into the getaway passage. That is how I plan to get the fort's gunpowder stores into your hands, Black Elk. The actual destruction of the garrison will be easy enough, after Rawhide Kerr supplies the guns."

Kerr grinned at the Indian.

"All right, this powwow is over, so far as we're concerned," the beefy renegade said. "You know the set-up, Chief. The rest is up to you. You know what we want—exclusive trappin' and huntin' privileges in the Blackfoot country."

Billy Bates now understood the motive for Rawhide Kerr's outlawry. Pelts commanded high prices at Hudson's Bay Company trading posts. A few years of trapping in Pinecone Valley, without competition from other whites, would make Rawhide Kerr a rich man. Sandy Jenson, the doublecrossing Army quartermaster, would probably get a cut of Kerr's fur sales, as his Judas wages.

"The white brother speaks with a single tongue," Black Elk said majestically. "The Indian gets guns, destroys the paleface soldiers. You will have the furs of the Blackfoot's land and a treaty of friendship. I have spoken."

KERR and Jenson exchanged exultant glances.

"All right," the renegade agreed. "We'll lead you down the river to where our rifles are cached, Black Elk. Two gross of new-issue guns, waiting for your warriors. It's a shipment that me and Canuck waylaid last fall on its way to Fort Flintlock, and hid up here in the mountains. Major Fletcher still thinks you redskins jumped the wagons that were carryin' the guns."

"Striding over to where Buffalo Billy Bates lay, Kerr kicked the scout in the ribs with such force that the breath exploded from the American's lungs and he wilted with a gasp of agony.

"Now, start talkin', Bates!" thundered the outlaw. "I want to know everything Major Fletcher's told you —just what he sent you up here for, just how—"

Kerr's voice trailed off in a snarl. Bates' eyes had rolled back in their sockets. His jaw had sagged open, as if he had been knocked out by the brutal kick.

"He's out colder'n a herring, Rawhide," Sandy Jenson remarked. "You and Black Elk can torture the truth out of him after we've shown the chief where those rifles are cached."

Kerr swore fluently.

"Yeah," he said. "Canuck, tie this jasper to that fir tree yonder. We got to make sure he stays put until we get back." Then, speaking in the Blackfoot jargon, Kerr resumed: "Black Elk, your scalpin' can wait until we've showed you where those rifles are."

Feigning unconsciousness, Buffalo Billy Bates remained inert while Canuck untied his arms and legs and dragged him over to the trunk of a fir tree which towered over the campsite.

Pulling Bates' arms forward so they circled the rough-barked trunk, Canuck knotted his wrists together securely, so that Bates was left hugging the tree.

Through slitted eyelids, Bates watched Kerr and his men unload the travois and then, accompanied by Chief Black Elk, head off down the game trail and out of sight.

Five minutes after their departure,

Bates got to his feet, hitching his trussed arms up the trunk so he could stand erect.

Standing there, his cheek rubbing against the moss-covered bark of the Douglas fir which was his prison, the scout did some of the fastest thinking of his life.

For the time being, he was alone. When Chief Black Elk returned with the gun-smugglers, his doom would be sealed. Whether he gave out any information to Rawhide Kerr or not, Bates was positive that the Blackfoot chief would scalp him and leave him dangling, dead or dying, to this towering fir.

His wrists were knotted too securely for him to even think of loosening his bonds. Staring straight upward, he saw that the fir towered skyward as straight as a mast, a hundred feet higher than the surrounding forest.

The lowest limbs were at least seventy feet overhead, a characteristic of the Douglas fir. The crown of the tree was green and heavy with rich needles and cone buds.

As he stared upward at the green crown, sharply outlined against the blue sky, the germ of an idea came to Buffalo Billy Bates. If he were to escape Black Elk's scalping knife, it would be by his keen wits alone.

"Earless Ed Patterson lives less'n two miles from here," muttered the scout. "My only chance is to attract his attention, and hope he can get here before Kerr returns."

With a vague, perhaps unworkable plan taking form in his brain, Buffalo Billy Bates started climbing the tree, hitching his bound wrists upward as he hugged the trunk, his moccasins finding toe-holds on the rough surface of the bark.

The trunk tapered the higher he climbed, giving his arms more freedom. Within twenty minutes he had climbed above the level of the surrounding trees, and had a clear view of Cat-Ear Mountain.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Earless Ed Patterson*

UP BETWEEN the towering crags which had given Cat-Ear Mountain its name since earliest Indian times, Earless Ed Patterson was straddling the ridgepole of his squatty-built log cabin, busy shoving masses of thawing snow off the roof.

Throughout the winter, his cabin had been virtually buried under white drifts. But the arrival of the thawing season made it increasingly difficult to prevent his roof from leaking, and at the earliest opportunity he had set to work freeing the top of the cabin of its burden of snow.

Patterson was a small man, dressed in red mackinaw, buckskin-foxed jeans and high bullhide boots laced with thongs. His sparkling blue eyes were wide-set on either side of a cherry-red button of a nose. The rest of Patterson's face was lost in a bush of brindle whiskers, out of which a corncob pipe jutted.

Pausing in his labors when he reached one end of his ridge pole, Patterson seated himself on the edge of his rock chimney, cuffed back his coonskin cap and sleeved sweat from his face.

Patterson had purposely built his trapping lodge on Cat-Ear Mountain, for its lofty elevation made a surprise attack by the Blackfeet virtually impossible. The south slope of Cat-Ear Mountain was impossible to scale, and Patterson's rifle commanded the gentle northern slope of the peak, which slanted down into the winding valley of the Boise.

It had become second nature for Earless Ed Patterson to keep his eyes peeled for Indian sign, whenever he was outside his log hut. And now, as

his blue gaze swept the endless expanse of snow-coated timber, an amazing detail caught his eye.

A plume of smoke was spiraling up into the cloudless sky, from a point directly below Cat-Ear Mountain!

For an instant, the little trapper believed he had spotted evidence of a campfire of considerable proportions —and since Patterson was the only trapper in the Boise region, a campfire meant Indians.

Following the smoke column to its base, Patterson gave vent to a startled oath.

The top of a lofty fir tree, growing near the meandering line of the river, was blazing like a torch, its flaming crown a scarlet daub against the background of snow-mottled green.

"Lightnin' must 'a' hit that—" he began.

But even as he voiced the words, Patterson knew that was impossible. The flaming tree was burning briskly, and lightning bolts did not come from a cloudless blue sky!

With an oath, the mackinaw-coated trapper hung his snow shovel on the rooftree and skidded down the slant to leap off into the snow below the eaves.

Hurrying inside, Patterson took down a pair of saddle-bags from a wall peg and removed from one of the pouches an ancient brass telescope.

Outdoors again, Patterson extended the instrument and fixed it to one eye, his hands rock-steady as he focused the spy-glass on the blazing tip of the fir which towered high above the surrounding timber.

THE powerful telescope brought the flaming fir needles so close Patterson could almost imagine he felt the heat. The resinous needles were crackling like fireworks, the blaze already licking through the uppermost limbs and burning itself out.

Here, indeed, was a mystery for any woodsman to unravel. Only a lightning-burst could ignite the topmost limbs of a tall fir tree. There was no sign of a forest fire in the lower timber. So how—

Then, swinging his telescope down lower on the fir, Earless Ed Patterson stiffened.

A man in buckskins was shinnying down the tree trunk, resembling a bug against the slim bole of the fir. The telescope revealed the climber's white face, turned away from the blistering heat overhead. Smoldering twigs dropped past the climber, as he hitched his jerky way toward the ground.

"Now what in tarnation? That feller clumb that tree and set fire to the limbs, knowin' they'd burn like fury from the turpentine in the needles, and melt what snow was clingin' to the limbs. But why?"

Cudgeling his brains for the explanation of the amazing spectacle outlined in the circle of magnified vision afforded by his powerful glass, Patterson could find no reasonable explanation for what he saw.

"It's a signal, most likely," Patterson decided. "If that tree-climbin' feller was an Injun, I'd say it was a trick to get me to come down to investigate. But he's sure a white man."

Hastening back inside, Patterson returned the glass to his saddle-bags. Then he took down a long-barreled hunting rifle from an elkhorn spread above his door, and hurried out through a rear door of the cabin to the lean-to stable where he kept his horse.

Five minutes later Patterson was heading down the north slope of Cat-Ear Mountain, his horse having hard going through the snow. But Patterson had broken a trail with his webs a few days before, so that the pony did not have to flounder through heavy drifts.

Vanishing into the timberline growth, Patterson picked up a game trail and threaded down it until his ears caught the rushing sound of the Boise's waters.

Through occasional breaks in the timber, the trapper was able to keep the burning tree spotted. The blaze had stripped the inflammable needles off the upper limbs by now, and the charred wood was merely smoldering. Another hour, and the last spark would be extinguished, leaving the charred tree-top towering above the verdant evergreens rimming the river.

Dismounting, Patterson led his horse behind a snow-hung maple clump and ground-tied it.

Then, with the stealth of a born woodsman, the trapper headed through the underbrush, in the general direction of the tree of mystery.

Ten minutes later, he was peering through the tangled jungle of wild hackberry brush and dead ferns, into a clearing. Overhead loomed the towering Douglas fir, its blackened crest smoking like a wet torch.

IN THE clearing, Earless Ed Patterson caught sight of a Morgan pony, saddled and bridled, a few feet from where he was hidden.

Then, his eyes ranging over to the foot of the fir, Patterson had a clear view of the man he had seen climbing down from the lofty crest of the tree.

The man was standing on the ground, his moccasined feet straddling a massive root. And he was hugging the tree trunk, as if clinging to it for support.

Not quite convinced that he was not being lured into a trap, Patterson parted the brush and stepped cautiously into the open.

The crunch of the trapper's boots on a light skift of snow brought the head of the tree-hugging man around, alarm and hope mingled in his taut, bark-bruised face.

"Patterson!" gasped the youth hoarsely. "Are you—"

The trapper grunted with surprise, then headed toward the tree with rifle held warily. Then, for the first time, he saw the reason for the stranger's queer posture. His wrists were tied together, forcing him to belly up to the tree trunk.

"Reckon I be," acknowledged the trapper, pulling a long-bladed skinning knife from a belt sheath and severing Bates' bonds with a single stroke. "Injuns tied you up here, huh?"

Buffalo Billy Bates reeled back from the tree, his legs wobbling with exhaustion from his lofty climb, his lips blue with cold.

"I'm Buffalo Billy Bates from Fort Flintlock," he chattered, teeth rattling with cold. He pointed toward the case of Army rifles. "Some renegades and Chief Black Elk himself captured me while I was headin' for your place."

Patterson tugged off his coonskin cap and glanced up at the smoking top of the tree. His long gray hair fell back to reveal a deformity which Bates had not noticed up to now—Both of Patterson's ears had been cropped off close to his head.

Catching Bates' gaze, Patterson explained wryly:

"Injuns cut off my flappers when I was trappin' beaver up in the Missoula country, couple o' winters back."

Patterson's gaze lifted once more to the fire-blackened treetop, a hundred feet overhead.

"I'll be hornswoggled," he commented bewilderedly, "if I can see how you set that tree ablaze, when you was hogtied thataway."

Bates rubbed his wrists briskly to restore the circulation. Then, unlacing his buckskin jacket, he revealed a flint and steel dangling around his neck by a thong—primitive fire-making equipment which the scout habitually carried.

"The higher up I climbed, the smaller the tree became," Bates explained his feat. "When I got up to the first limb, of course, I couldn't climb any higher. But by huggin' the trunk with my legs, I could get my arms around to where I could reach this flint an' steel, and strike a few sparks. The sun had dried out the fir

needles up there, and you know how quick they catch on fire."

BATES grinned at the trapper's expression of incredulity.

"I had hoped I could burn my bonds in two, once I got that limb to blazing," he confessed. "But it was too hot, and the fire leaped up into the higher branches too quick for me. I'd have roasted in a hurry if I didn't climb back down. Then all I could do was hope and pray you'd see the fire and come down to investigate."

Patterson stoked his corncob pipe, Fixing Bates with his blue eyes, the trapper asked anxiously:

"You're from Fort Flintlock, eh? Then you better hustle back and report to Major Fletcher that three or four hundred Blackfeet braves are camped ten miles or so up the river. I been spyin' on 'em for the past week. I'd aimed to ride down to the fort as soon as I heard the war-drums begin poundin', because that'd mean Black Elk was fixin' to hit the warpath."

In swift, terse sentences Buffalo Billy Bates described the events leading up to his capture. His narrative had ample proof in the case of Army rifles which Rawhide Kerr had left here in the clearing.

"If the Blackfeet have as many warriors as you say waiting to strike, Patterson," Bates wound up, "it means they aim to head for Pinecone Valley as soon as they get hold of the guns. And with Sandy Jenson doublecrossing Fletcher's troops back at the fort, they wouldn't have a chance."

The gnomelike trapper waggled his head soberly.

"The fate of Fort Flintlock depends on them Injuns not getting Kerr's rifles, Ed," Bates went on gravely. "Right this minute, Kerr's showing Black Elk where those rifles are cached. If you'll loan me that Dragoon you're packin', and your rifle, I could nip this Injun uprisin' in the bud. Without rifles, Black Elk's warriors wouldn't dare attack the fort."

Earless Ed Patterson leaned his hunting rifle against the fir tree and unbuckled his gun-belt, passing the holstered Colt to Buffalo Billy Bates.

"I'll hang on to this Spencer o' mine, son," Patterson said. "You an' me are all that stands between Pinecone Valley and a bloody massacre. We can foller this Rawhide Kerr's trail before it gets dark, I reckon, an' locate that rifle cache before Black Elk can bring his redskin army down here and arm 'em."


*"Yuh Better Drift Before Things Blow Up—"*

**That's what the cowmen told Matt Younger when he came to the Seven Rivers Country—but they couldn't stop this rough and ready gun avenger from teaching a range hog a lesson in**

**COLTMAN FROM NOWHERE**

**By JOE ARCHIBALD**

A THRILL-PACKED COMPLETE NOVELET
COMING NEXT ISSUE

## CHAPTER V

### *Renegade Retribution*

A FEW miles down the river, Rawhide Kerr and his men labored like beavers while Chief Black Elk looked on, his flinty eyes bright with interest.

Trip after trip the renegades made into the brush-choked mouth of a cavern which had been formed in prehistoric times by the undercutting waters of the Boise River. And each time the renegades emerged from the cavern mouth, they carried a pine box filled with Army rifles.

"There you be, Black Elk," Kerr said, when he and Sandy Jenson carried out the last of the packing cases. "Two gross o' shootin' irons that were consigned to Fort Flintlock. Two hundred an' eighty-eight guns, Black Elk. Enough to arm your tribe to the hilt, with those you've got already."

Sandy Jenson dry-washed his hands, an evil grin of satisfaction on his lips as he surveyed the tier of packing cases.

"I'll be gettin' back to Flintlock to carry out my end o' the deal, boys," the doublecrossing quartermaster said. "When the Blackfeet reach Pinecone Valley, they'll find gunpowder waitin' for 'em."

Rawhide Kerr strode over beside Black Elk and jerked a thumb upriver.

"We'll get back to Buffalo Billy Bates," he told the Indian. "Soon as we get what info that scout knows, we'll stand by and see how good you are with that scalpin' knife, Chief."

Sandy Jenson brushed snow from his uniform and headed over to where he had left his horse near the rifle cache.

"I'm sorry I can't wait around an' see you count coup on that scout," the quartermaster laughed harshly, "but I got to get back to the fort before Major Fletcher gets suspicious. After all, I'm supposed to be out on a huntin' trip, to bring back venison to restock our—"

Sandy Jenson broke off, as his ears caught a rattle of hoofbeats on the trail which led down the valley. Then the quartermaster's yell of dismay brought Rawhide Kerr, Canuck and the Blackfeet chief wheeling around, to stare at the mouth of the trail to eastward.

Out into the clearing before the cavern where the renegades had cached the firearms, came a buckskin-clad rider aboard a leggy Morgan, a six-gun glinting in the westering sunrays as he reined up.

*"Buffalo Billy Bates!"*

Rawhide Kerr croaked out the words, even as he caught sight of the whiskery-faced little trapper who spurred out alongside Bates' stirrup. The trapper was gripping a long rifle in his gnarled hands.

"You'll see all there is to see, right here an' now, Jenson!" called out the scout. "Hoist 'em, you mangy wolves. These rifles have gone as far as—"

With a wild scream, Sandy Jenson went for his belt gun, driven to a suicidal draw as he realized that a return to Fort Flintlock would mean the exposure of his treason and quick retribution from a firing squad.

EVEN as Jenson whipped his Army Colt to a level, the big rifle in Earless Ed Patterson's grasp bucked and roared, and Sandy Jenson staggered backward to collide with the tier of packing cases, his forehead drilled by the trapper's slug.

The half-breed echoed Jenson's dying scream and frog-hopped for the shelter of his travois pony. But before he could snatch the rifle which lay on the pack poles, Buffalo Billy Bates' borrowed six-gun spat flame and the breed was kicking in the snow.

Canuck dropped to one knee, his

rifle thundering, at the same instant that Rawhide Kerr clawed a six-shooter from its holster.

For an instant, the pitched battle hung in the balance, as Earless Ed Patterson frantically reloaded his rifle and Buffalo Billy Bates' Colt was wavering between the double threat of Kerr and his henchman, Canuck.

The gun roared in Bates' fist, and his slug bored Rawhide Kerr in the belly, dropping the renegade boss to his knees before he could draw a bead on the mounted scout across the clearing.

Canuck's rifle blazed, and agony shot through Buffalo Billy Bates as he felt the rifle bullet slam the barrel of his smoking Dragoon .45 and knock the six-gun off into the brush.

With a Blackfoot war cry, Chief Black Elk came charging forward, hurling a tomahawk with all his strength at Earless Ed Patterson.

In his desperate effort to dodge the hurtling axe, Patterson had to hold his fire and parry the whizzing hatchet with his rifle barrel.

RAWHIDE KERR'S eyes glazed as he saw the Indian chief draw the Dragoon .45 he had taken from Buffalo Billy Bates and whip it upward, jerking trigger. But the life fled from Kerr's body and he toppled face down into the snow before he could see whether Black Elk's slug had hit its mark.

Unaccustomed to using a six-gun, Black Elk's first slug whizzed past Buffalo Billy's ear, missing him by a scant inch. But the yowling chief was charging up to point-blank range, cocking the Dragoon for a second shot that could not miss.

With incredible speed, Buffalo Billy Bates nocked an arrow to the string of the chokeberry bow and loosed the shaft, even as Chief Black Elk plunged abreast of his Morgan.

A split instant before the redskin could trigger a close-range bullet at his target, his rush was halted abruptly by the feather-tipped arrow which caught him in the throat, piercing his neck and severing the jugular.

"Yuh got him, son!" bellowed Earless Ed Patterson jubilantly, swinging down from his horse as he saw Chief Black Elk drop his six-gun and claw feebly at the arrow which had pierced his neck. "That's one more good Injun for yuh!"

Black Elk's corpse toppled into the snow with a sodden thump. His moccasined feet kicked the earth for a moment, and then a ghastly rattle issued from his throat as he breathed his last.

The white man's greatest enemy in all Idaho had gone to the Happy Hunting Ground, plunged into eternity by an arrow shot by a paleface with an accuracy which could not be equalled by any of Black Elk's tribesmen.

Surveying the corpse-littered shambles, Earless Ed Patterson and Buffalo Billy Bates were not exulting in their own victory against double odds, in this moment. They were remembering the garrison at Fort Flintlock, and the white families who dwelt in Pinecone Valley. Those settlers were freed now from the appalling menace which had overhung their peaceful homes.

"We nipped the massacre in the bud, son!" bragged Earless Ed Patterson, a touch of a swagger in his stride as he followed Buffalo Billy Bates over to the neat stack of packing cases, each containing a dozen new Army rifles.

"Yes," responded the scout from Fort Flintlock, a vast relief flooding through him. "Black Elk's warriors will have a long wait for these firearms, Ed. Because I intend that they shall get back to Fort Flintlock, even if we have to build a raft and float them back down the river!"

●

**More BUFFALO BILLY BATES Stories by SCOTT CARLETON in Coming Issues**

The chain of his handcuffs pressed against Nancy's throat

# TROUBLE HAS ONE EYE

## By SAM BRANT

*This necktie party comes to grief when they mistake waddy Tom Bradford for a mysterious outlaw who is wanted as a murderer and kidnaper!*

THE little cowtown seemed mighty quiet for so early in the evening. Steerville usually came alive after sundown. As he rode slowly along the dusty street Tom Bradford found that the lingering hush made him uneasy. It just was not natural. Even his horse seemed to sense it and was acting right spooky.

"Somethin' shore is wrong," Bradford muttered, talking to himself like a man will when he is puzzled. "Don't see a soul in sight either."

Most of the buildings along the single street were dark—blank squares in the shadows—but here and there light gleamed from a window or open doorway. Bradford's pinto was skittish and trying to turn back in the direction from which they had come. The waddy had to keep a firm hand on the reins.

Down at the hitching rail in front of the Copperhead Saloon three saddle horses huddled close together as though afraid of something. Bradford frowned as he rode toward the saloon. He was certain that he was heading straight into trouble.

He reached the rail and swung out of the saddle, moving around a little to relieve the muscle kinks like an experienced cowhand will do after he has done considerable riding. Bradford figured he had traveled a right smart distance since he had headed north with that trail herd three weeks ago.

He tied the pinto's reins to the hitching rail, leaving his mount standing a little distance from the other three horses. Then he stepped through the batwing doors of the saloon.

As soon as he got inside he stopped and stood staring. The black patch he wore over his right eye bothered him. It wasn't always so easy to see with his left, even though his blue eyes were usually mighty keen. That red hot spark from a camp fire that had blown into his right eye sure had played hob with his vision.

All the same he felt he was seeing too much. Three dead men dangled from ropes fastened to the rafters of the big barroom. It was a sight that made him feel a little sick.

He moved away from the doorway, one hand in his slanting cartridge belt. The soft sawdust on the floor yielded under his feet and the jingle of his spurs seemed loud for the bleak silence. He kept staring at the hanging men.

Even in death the distorted faces of the trio looked hard and tough. The empty holsters that hung on their belts were worn from constant use. To Bradford all three men bore the stamp of gunslicks, riders of owlhoot trails.

"Reckon they got only what was comin' to them," he said softly. "That ain't for me to judge."

Behind him the batwings creaked as they opened and closed.

HE TURNED swiftly, fingers tightening on the butt of his gun. Then he hesitated. Two men stood there, the heavy long-barreled Colts in their hands trained on him, and their trigger fingers looking right itchy.

Bradford let go of his gun and slowly raised his hands to the level of his ears.

"Patch Dillon, huh?" The taller of the two men had a rasping voice. "We figgered yuh'd come back to see what happened to yore three men after the posse rode out of town. That's why folks around Steerville have been keepin' under cover tonight."

"I ain't Patch Dillon," said Bradford flatly.

He was looking at the law badges on the shirts of the two men. The stars of a sheriff and a deputy that seemed to gleam at him wickedly in the light from the hanging oil lamps in the saloon.

"Get his shootin' iron, Joe," said the tall sheriff. "Don't move, Patch."

The second law man stepped forward and snatched Bradford's Colt from its sheath and then backed away smiling evilly, thrusting the captured weapon in the waistband of his trousers.

"Yuh'd be a fool to admit yuh was Patch Dillon," said the smaller man, who wore the deputy badge. "Dillon is wanted for murder, rustlin' and kidnapin' around here. If you-all are him, the chances of yuh stretchin' hemp are right good."

Bradford knew he was in a fix. He searched for straws of hope like a man

will when trouble is stacking up against him. He had never seen these two men before. If they were now the Law in Steerville things had sure changed around this part of the country since he had ridden away with that herd three weeks ago.

"What happened to Sheriff Buck Lawton?" he asked. "And his deputy Jim Elgin?"

"You should know," said the lean sheriff, "seein' as Patch Dillon downed them both." He scowled. "My name is Sam Torrington, in case yuh're interested, and this is my deputy, Joe Whiting."

"Can't say it seems like the time for me to say I'm glad to know yuh," Bradford said dryly. "What makes yuh so shore I'm this Dillon hombre yuh're after?"

"He's a lean tall jigger like you are," said Torrington. "And he wears a patch over one eye. Course I'll grant yuh that every time anyone has seen Dillon there's been a bandana mask hidin' the lower part of his face. But that patch over yore eye is a dead giveaway."

From out in the street came voices and footsteps on the plank walks. Evidently the citizens of Steerville were coming out of hiding. Bradford was doing a lot of thinking. He had been something of a stranger in these parts when he had hired out to the Bar J drive outfit three weeks ago.

Besides, old Lem Jackson and his regular cowhands had stayed at the big town a hundred miles farther north after shipping the herd east by rail. There was not much chance of Tom Bradford finding anybody in town who could actually identify him. Unconsciously he touched his tanned neck as though it hurt. He was remembering those three men attached to the rafters behind him. Just his word. That was all these two lawmen had to go on that he was not Patch Dillon.

The saloon doors creaked open. A small group of men entered. Bradford figured that most of the population of the town must be riding with that big posse that Sheriff Torrington had mentioned. But where were they riding and why?

At the sight of the prisoner, one of the group uttered a startled cry and hurried forward.

"SO YUH'VE got him, Sheriff," he exclaimed excitedly. He was a gray-haired man, dressed in range clothes. His face was drawn from worry and he looked to Bradford like he had been suffering a heap. "Good! Have you questioned him yet? Did he tell you what they have done with my daughter? Where have they taken Nancy?"

"Ain't had a chance to drag anything out of him, Warren," said the sheriff. "But don't yuh worry—we'll make him talk. Folks around here don't like kidnapers. Not any!"

Bradford just stood there looking at the six men who had come into the saloon with Warren. One of them was short and fat and he went behind the bar and picked up an apron. This showed he was the bartender. Another was dressed in the usual black garments of a professional gambler. The rest appeared average citizens of the town.

"Yuh better put the handcuffs on him, Joe," said Torrington to his deputy. "And get his gun too. Then we'll take him over to the jail and question him there."

Bradford stared at the group out of his one good eye. He had a wild impulse to try to fight his way out of this mess and then decided against it. A man wouldn't stand a chance with so many of them against him. They would shoot him down before he could reach the door.

The rafter on which the ropes that held the three dead men groaned as though the weight of the hanging bodies was becoming too much for it. Bradford flinched as the deputy drew a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket

and snapped them around his wrists. Bradford found those tight bands of steel mighty cold and uncomfortable.

"Just a minute, gentlemen," said a lean horse-faced man dressed in store clothes. "We want this to be fair—and if Mr. Dillon wishes to engage a lawyer to defend him I'll be glad to be of service."

"Yuh would suggest somethin' like that, Grit Mitchell, yuh crooked lawshark," snapped Jeff Warren. "Reckon yuh figger this outlaw killer has some money salted away and yuh aim to collect it."

"I knew yuh were lower than a mole under a cellar, Mitchell," chimed in the sheriff. "But when yuh have the nerve to offer to defend a man who bossed the kidnapin' of Jeff Warren's daughter yuh make me ashamed of even knowin' yuh."

"All right," said Mitchell angrily. "Let your prisoner take care of himself. By the great horned spoon I was only trying to be sure that justice would be done."

For an instant all the other men glanced at Grit Mitchell as he headed for the swinging doors. Bradford saw his chance and went into action. He reached up with his handcuffed hands and grabbed the feet of the nearest of the dead men. His weight combined with the weight of the three corpses proved too much for the rafters above.

The beam split in two with a loud crack—and part of the ceiling came crashing down. The lamps that had been hanging there were shattered. They went out as they hit the floor. The saloon was plunged into darkness.

Bradford headed for the door, moving fast. His plans had already been made. He bumped into the deputy sheriff in the darkness, and knocked the man aside with a shoulder thrust. All around him he could hear cursing and shouting.

He reached the batwings and leaped out onto the plank walk. Behind him a gun roared. The bullet came so close he could feel the wind.

"Stop him!" shouted Torrington. "He's gettin' away."

Bradford reached his horse, holstered his retrieved gun, jerked the reins from the hitching rail. He swung awkwardly into the saddle because of his handcuffed wrists. Another shot thundered from the door of the saloon. But Bradford was heading his horse out of town at a gallop.

HE HAD a certain amount of satisfaction. Although his wrists were still shackled, he had succeeded in getting back his gun. That .45 resting against his right leg felt mighty good to Tom Bradford right now.

"They'll be comin' after me pronto," he muttered. "Reckon I better do somethin' about that."

He found a cluster of rocks just about a quarter of a mile along the road outside of the town, and turned his pinto in among the boulders. Bradford had been figuring what he would expect the men of the Law to do if he had been riding with them, and he was acting accordingly.

"They'll be plumb certain that since I lit out from town the way I did I'll just keep right on goin'," he said as he halted his horse back into the shadows. "But I aim to fool them on that guess."

He waited and finally heard the thundering hoofs of a group of horsemen heading out after him from town. The riders swept by with no more than a casual glance at the big rocks to the left of the road. In a few minutes they were gone, heading on southward along the road. Bradford waited patiently. He wanted to make sure there were no stragglers.

Finally he heard a sound. The hoofbeats of a single horse came thudding along the road from the direction of Steerville. A tall rider dressed in range clothes loomed into view, riding past the rocks.

Bradford caught a glimpse of the other's face in the light of the moon. He could not distinguish the man's

features though they seemed vaguely familiar. Then he gave a start of surprise. There was a black patch over the horseman's left eye.

"Patch Dillon!" exclaimed Bradford, reaching for his gun. "Then he was in town after all!"

Those handcuffs proved awkward. Before Bradford could get his gun out of his holster the outlaw leader was out of easy six-gun range. Shootin' a hombre off a movin' horse in nighttime is no easy thing to do with a Colt, and Bradford knew it.

"Reckon it's just as well he got past," muttered Bradford. "Maybe if I trail that jasper he may lead me to the hideout where they are holdin' that Warren gal a prisoner."

He rode after Dillon, careful to keep off the road, and in the shadows as much as possible, but always managing to trail the man ahead of him. By the time they had gone three or four miles Tom Bradford felt right puzzled.

It looked to him as though Patch Dillon knew someone was trailing him and was anxious to have him keep on doing so. Just why, was what Bradford could not understand.

Finally Dillon reached a spot where the road led back into the mountains. It seemed to Bradford that they were sure heading into rough country as he followed the other man. Suddenly he halted his horse and sat in the saddle watching anxiously. Two riders appeared. They galloped after Dillon with guns flaming.

The outlaw leader returned the fire as he fled off the road and headed his mount on back into the hills. The other two riders passed close enough to Bradford for him to see the badges on their shirts. He realized Sheriff Sam Torrington and his deputy Joe Whiting had started in pursuit of Dillon.

"For a wanted man Patch Dillon shore seems to be lookin' for trouble," muttered Bradford as he trailed the three men back into the mountains. "And I'd like to know why."

Ahead there came the report of six-guns. Four shots and then silence. Bradford frowned as he halted his pinto and slid out of the saddle. There had been something about that shooting that sounded mighty final for someone. He wondered if those bullets had meant finish for Dillon or for the two lawmen.

BRADFORD ground-hitched his horse and edged his way through the brush cautiously until he reached a little clearing. Here there was an old log cabin standing bleakly in the moonlight. The door of the cabin stood half open and a dim light came from within.

He started across the clearing toward the cabin. He had almost reached it when a rifle cracked like a whip back in the brush. The bullet ripped through the brim of Tom Bradford's Stetson. Bradford gave a single leap. He landed inside the cabin. Then he slammed the door shut behind him. He turned and saw a slender dark-haired girl in a red dress standing there glaring at him.

"Murderer!" Nancy Warren said bitterly as she glared at the lean dark-haired man with the patch over his right eye. "Why did you come back? The deputy is dead. You killed him all right."

She shuddered and looked at the still form of Joe Whiting lying on the floor in one corner of the cabin. Bradford saw that the girl was not even tied and he wondered about that. She sure was pretty, he decided, even when she was standing there staring at him with hate and loathing in her eyes.

"Reckon yuh think I'm Patch Dillon," Bradford said. "But as it happens, I ain't. My name is Tom Bradford."

"Why bother trying to make me believe a story like that?" retorted Nancy. "Even without the mask I know you are Dillon."

"Quiet!" Bradford said tensely as he heard hoofbeats outside the cabin,

and moved closer to her. "Somebody comin'."

"I hope it is the sheriff," said Nancy. "If it is, he'll have his posse with him. Sheriff Torrington got away. He was only wounded when you shot at him. Sheriff Torrington told me he was going after his men. He was sure they weren't far away."

She started toward the door. Bradford figured he had to stop her and do it fast. He was holding his gun in his right fist. But he reached out and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dropped his arms down over the girl's head. The chain of the handcuffs pressed against her slender throat as he pulled her back to his broad chest. Then he faced toward the entrance.

The gun was in his hand and ready as the door opened. The sheriff, Jeff Warren and Grit Mitchell stepped into the cabin. Voices of other men could be heard outside.

"Told yuh we would find him here," said Torrington. "Looks like we've got yuh now, Dillon."

"Yuh start shootin' and the gal will stop lead," said Bradford. "Remember that and listen to what I've got to say. First I want yuh to answer a couple of questions, Sheriff."

"All right." Torrington nodded. "What are they?"

"Yuh claim that Dillon is a killer wanted for murder, rustling and kidnaping," said Bradford. "Who did he kill? What proof yuh got he's been doin' any rustling?"

"Old Zack Harvey, who owned the Bar H outfit caught Patch Dillon and three of his men stealin' stock," said the sheriff. "Patch shot Harvey and left him for dead. But the old man lived long enough to tell what happened. He give us the description of the three men with Dillon. They weren't wearin' masks."

"And yuh must have caught them three men in Steerville this afternoon and strung them up there in the saloon," said Bradford. "Then yuh waited for Dillon to show up to see what had happened to his friends. I come riding into town. Because I had

a patch on my eye yuh figgered I was Dillon. Is that right?"

"Still figgerin' so," said Torrington.

BRADFORD found the girl had grown strangely passive as she leaned against him listening.

"Was Grit Mitchell riding with yuh when the posse lit out from town after me tonight?" asked Bradford looking at the lawyer.

"No, he wasn't," said Sheriff Torrington. "Why?"

"Because Mitchell is the sidewinder yore huntin'," snapped Bradford. "The jasper is the man who called himself Patch Dillon."

"You're crazy!" exclaimed Mitchell, glaring at the waddy. "By the great horned spoon, I won't stand for such accusations!"

Bradford lifted his arms above the girl's head so that his shackled wrists no longer held her by the throat. Torrington saw his chance and his gun came out of his holster fast.

"No, wait, Sheriff!" cried Nancy. "This man is right. He isn't Dillon. Dillon wore a patch over his left eye and this man is wearing one over his right." She turned her head and glanced at Bradford. She still stood in front of him to protect him from the sheriff's gun. "Besides Dillon's eyes—at least the one I could see—were brown and this man's eyes are blue. And Dillon was always saying 'by the great horned spoon.'"

Grit Mitchell cursed as he heard the girl's words and leaped toward the door. As he reached it the gun in Bradford's hand roared. The lawyer pitched forward to sprawl motionless in the doorway.

"Watch him, Sheriff," said Bradford. "He ain't dead. I don't shoot men in the back. I just put a bullet in his leg and knocked him down."

Torrington and Warren seized the lawyer. They drew him to his feet, cursing and struggling. The sheriff searched quickly through the pockets of the range clothes that Mitchell was now wearing and drew out a black patch which the outlaw leader had used to conceal one of his eyes.

"That shore settles it," said the sheriff. "He's Dillon all right."

"Grit Mitchell must have spotted me outside of town," said Bradford. "That made it easy to trail him here. I also figgered he would try and pin the whole thing on me. Reckon he was a right desperate hombre because he only had them three men working with him." The waddy smiled. "I shore got into something when I rode into town tonight aimin' to have me a right good meal."

"Come home to the ranch with Dad and me," said Nancy. "I'll cook you a real meal." She smiled. "And maybe Dad can use an extra hand in the outfit."

Tom Bradford smiled like a man will when he suddenly finds the world is mighty good. He hoped that his other eye would get well soon like the doctor who patched it up had promised. The way he figured Nancy Warren would be twice as pretty—if he could look at her with both eyes.

*Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts get into the toughest fracas of their lives when rustlers and gunnies invade Indian County in*

SHORT TRIGGER MEN

**Next Issue's Painted Post Novelet**

By TOM GUNN

# HAM GOES TO THE DOGS

## By ALFRED L. GARRY

*It's a rip-roaring panic when Ham and Egg learn some man-huntin' tricks by workin' with a pair o' good canines!*

MY DEPUTY, Ham, has gone to the dogs. And that ain't no figger of speech. With the reward money we get for salting young Clem Rankin away at Deer Lodge, my pardner's bought himself a pair of thoroughbred English setters. He's training them how to hunt fancy.

Now, I ain't ever been one to hold that dogs are necessary to scare myself up a ration of grouse. Me, when I get a hankering for bird meat, I just skulk around the tamaracks until I spot a flock roosting in the trees. Then I line up two or three in a row and pot 'em with one shot of my old .45.

"But that ain't sportin'!" Ham protests, polishing up an English double gun with fancy engraving on the barrel. "These setters of mine, when I get 'em trained, will range out ahead of me. They'll smell out the bird in the grass, and point it out to me. When the bird flushes, I'll knock it

down with this scatter-gun, and my dogs will retrieve it. Now—"

"Yeah," I cut in. "I shore wish a sheriff could train a dog to flush out and retrieve snake-in-the-grass thieves the same way!"

"Could be!" Ham calculates with a shrug.

"Shore!" I crack right back. "And it could be that you could give me a hand. Folks are beginning to talk. Here you are roaming over the prairie with your dogs, while I'm riding my pants thin trying to keep the stockholders of the Deep Gulch Mine from being highgraded into the poor house.

"Them stockholders are riding their superintendent, Jo Peterson, to produce gold—or else. Even sending Clem to the pen ain't helped things. Peterson ain't getting out enough gold to pay for the powder.

"If the mine shuts down, the citizens will hold us responsible. And that goes from storekeeper, Perry, to Diego Zappie, the pig rancher who collects their garbage. They all got votes. We've got to dab our twine on the high-grade ore thief."

"Yep, it's a riddle." Ham tugs his ear thoughtful. "Old Andrews used to get out plenty of gold before he died. Some of it wire gold that could be picked out of the rock with a knife blade. But—"

"But, nothing!" I clip. "Durned little ore is getting to the smelter. I figgered when we caught Clem Rankin with that gunny sack of high-grade we'd solved our problem."

"And we solved nothin'!" Ham furrows his brow, which brings his hair down mighty close to the bridge of his nose. "Somehow, I sorta wish the kid coulda proved that he found that sack of high-grade, and was bringin' it in to us."

"So do I, Ham," I agree. "Clem always impressed me as a feller to ride the river with. But, evidence is evidence. And old man Peterson shore piled it on the kid. Twelve good men on the jury believed Clem was guilty."

"And I know he wasn't!" a voice says suddenly, behind us.

WE BOTH jerk our heads around to face Nellie Andrews. She's standing there with her pretty face flushed, and her wide eyes sparkling with indignation.

"I don't have to tell you lawmen what I think!" she declares with an angry shake of her curls. "Clem was railroaded right into the penitentiary. And my stepfather, Jo Peterson, was the man who did it. I'm going to move heaven and earth to set Clem free."

"There, there!" Ham says, just like he calms down a spooked bronc. "No use gettin' all het up, Nellie. Not a man on the jury thinks Clem got a deal from the bottom of the deck. If the youngster can keep his shirt on, his good behavior will get him out in two years. You'll still have your looks, Nellie."

Ham adds the last with a sly twinkle. Because Clem and Nellie were keeping company. And a right handsome span they made, too.

"What you got there, another cake?" I ask, seeing the box in her hand.

"Yes," she says eagerly. "Ham told me you were taking a prisoner to Deer Lodge tonight. Would you mind taking this cake to Clem?"

"This is the fifth or sixth cake I've taken to Clem," I joke. "Ain't sending him files and a gun baked in 'em, are you?"

"Certainly!" Nellie laughs gayly. "This one contains the bullets. Heft it."

She passes the box to me. And for a feller who's toothed some of her delicious light cakes, this one is mighty heavy.

"The warden might want to cut into this cake." I say. "Routine inspection."

"Smuggling things to prisoners in cakes went out with the hoop skirt," Nellie laughs. "Why even the writers

don't use that gag any more. That cake seems heavy because of the thick crockery plate it's on."

"Shore," Ham speaks up, licking his chops hopeful. "Here's the heavy plate yuh brung us our *last* cake on."

"No, this is the *last* cake, Ham." Nellie's eyes sparkle as she hands Ham a box. "I didn't forget you."

"Gosh, thanks." Ham gushes, rubbing his ample breadbasket. "Us old bachelors shore appreciate the delicacy. I—I wasn't hintin'!"

"Don't you go let the nasty old warden spoil my frosting!" Nellie admonishes, turning to go. "I want to make Clem as happy as I can!"

"What's goin' on in here, Nellie!" Jo Peterson, her step-father stomps into our office. Hulking, overbearing, and arrogant as a slave driver, Peterson glares at us plumb hostile.

"Did I hear yuh mention Clem Rankin's name?" he roars, his black beard bristling, as he levels a suspicious finger. "What's in that box?" he demands.

"Slack off before yuh bust a cinch!" Ham retorts, geting hot under his collar. "What yuh heard was Miss Nellie sayin' she'd brung some table scraps for my bird dogs. Me and Miss Nellie plan to do a little dog-trainin' this afternoon."

"I don't hold to no daughter of mine having truck with lawmen!" Peterson blares in that bull-of-the-woods voice of his.

"Step-daughter!" Nellie corrects, her fine chin coming up sharply. "And I'll do as I please! You bullied my mother into an early grave. But you can't order me around."

"Can't I, Miss?"

PETERSON makes an angry lunge toward Nellie. But somehow, Ham's foot gets in the way. As the bully trips, Ham's fist lashes out, catching him on the jaw. Like a poled ox, the big miner sprawls on the floor, out colder than an Eskimo's nose.

"He had it coming." I agree with Ham, after Peterson's picked himself up off the floor and left our office muttering threats. "But if that polecat bullies the mine stockholders into voting against us, we're as good as herding sheep after next election."

"And you did it all for me!" Nellie cries.

"It was a pleasure!" Ham grins, rubbing his bruised knuckles. "I've always figgered that underneath Peterson's beard was a fade-away chin. The man's all bluff!"

"Then do you suppose he's bluffing when he says I haven't any rights to my father's stock in Deep Gulch Mine?" Nellie asks eagerly.

"I went into that pretty thoroughly when he discharged all of the old help and put in a lot of foreigners." Ham says, patting her hand. "Your mother made Peterson your guardian all legal. There ain't anything that can be done about it until you are twenty-one."

"If you two are going to give them dogs a lesson, you'd better get going," I interrupt, putting Nellie's cake box beside my packed valise. "I'm catching the six o'clock train."

A day after I get back from the penitentiary, Warden Sommers stalks into my office, kicks the door shut with a backward flip of his boot, and fastens a cold eye on me.

"Sheriff Egbert," he says, "what do you know about this?"

As he barks the question, Warden Sommers slams down a gun on my desk. It's a queer contraption. A .38. The barrel's been sawed off right close to the frame. There ain't no walnut grips, and all superfluous metal has been filed from the cylinder to cut down the weight.

"Meaning what?" I want to know.

"Meaning that Clem Rankin used this gun to disarm a guard, changed clothes with him, and walked out of my penitentiary. He then stuck up a tipsy cowboy. So's we couldn't fasten a charge on him, Clem 'traded' this

gun for the feller's gear. Even got a bill of sale."

"But—"

"But nothing! We've been bamboozled by one of the oldest dodges of them all!"

Warden Sommers takes the escape gun, twists hard on the stubby barrel, which unscrews easily from the frame. With the edge of a dime from a screwdriver, he takes the gun to pieces, separating the parts into six little piles.

"I let you bring Clem six cakes," he goes on. "This gun came in in them cakes." Warden Sommers' voice commences to shake with rage as his voice raises to an outraged bellow. "Egg, to think that two old lawmen like us fell for such a shenanigan! An escape gun smuggled to a prisoner in a cake! That piece of calico has made a fool of us. We'll be the laughing stock of all Montana."

"But—but, Warden," I come back weakly, too flabbergasted to make much of a case. "You and me both hefted the cake and agreed that the unusual weight was due to the heavy crockery plate it was on."

"Yeah! But did you ever heft the plate alone?"

"Shore!" I come right back. "Nellie always gave Ham and me a cake for taking Clem his. Here's the plate her last cake came on.

I STEP into the kitchen and hand Warden Sommers the thick messhall plate that's heavier than my heart.

"Suckers!" Warden Sommers ejaculates with some other words. "Look what we found! Clem thought he'd hid 'em."

The warden lays down some fragments of a plate that looks just like the one I've produced. I pick them up. The fragments are light as a feather!

"Plaster of Paris imitation of the heavy crockery plate! Home-made!" Warden Sommers fumes. "It was no job at all for the minx to fool us old mosshorns. Egg, I can keep the lip of the guard buttoned, but if word ever gets out, we're sunk."

The warden suddenly looks around, demanding, "Where's Ham?"

"Out training some bird dogs," I confess, shamefaced. "We'd better not say anything to my pardner about this. He's always claimed that Clem Rankin told a straight story and was framed into being caught with that sack of high-grade ore. Ham's thicker than Missouri water with Nellie Andrews, Clem's gal."

"The cake-baker?"

"Yep, Warden." I nod sadly. "The cake-baker. We can't prove a thing against her without making the two of us look like long-eared jackasses."

I don't have to tell Warden Sommers that my pardner, Ham, is wiser than a whole schoolhouse full of owls. I know he's got the same personal suspicion that I have. It's dollars to doughnut holes that Ham's the one who cut down that .38, and put Nellie up to baking the pieces in Clem's cakes.

"I got to get back to the big house," Warden Sommers says. "You shadow the gal. Clem's bound to show up. Throw down on him, and we'll smuggle him back into his cell."

Worried as an old setting hen with a hatching of ugly ducklings, I slope out to see what Ham's up to with his bird dogs. Now, as a bronc-gentler, there ain't a peeler that can hold a candle to Ham. He can take the worst broom tail off the range, and in two weeks have it gentled so's it can be turned over to a hoss-shy schoolma'am.

As I watch Ham working with his two dogs, I can see he's got the same easy way with them. Animals seem to like my rollypolly pardner. Maybe it's because he don't hold to no cruelty.

And to him, shutting up a human animal in a penitentiary, when there's the least possibility that he may be innocent, is downright cruelty. That's why he schemed with Nellie Andrews to set Clem free.

The two of them are working with the younger dog. I swing my field glasses on the pair. Ham's got the setter pup, Mickey, on a long check cord. Flashy, eager, the dog quarters across the prairie, running in zigzags in front of them.

Suddenly, the pup halts, stiffens, comes to a quivering point. There's a grouse someplace in the grass. Nellie and Ham move up closer.

But the eager pup's not to be restrained. And it's natural because the tense strained position of a point has been developed from the dog's instinctive crouch before springing on its prey. Like an arrow, the over-enthusiastic pup suddenly bolts, flushing the bird before Ham and Nellie are within scattergun range.

As the dog springs forward, Ham sets his heels like a corral roper, and snubs up short on the check cord. The pup is jerked up short, tail over tea kettle, like a hoolihanned steer. Ham hauls in the dog, scolds him gently for his eagerness, and sends him out ranging again.

A STARTLED jackrabbit leaps up in front of the pup and is off for the horizon with express train speed. Mickey's a hunting dog first and last. It's too much for him. Gathering his feet under him, the pup takes out after the rabbit, barking joyfully.

But Ham again snubs him up short. And this time, tenderly as a mother disciplining a sensitive baby, Ham slaps the dog with his empty glove.

"Shame on you!" he chides. "Chasing a jackrabbit! They ain't sportin'. Or fit vittles! Go on now. Find us a bird."

Again Mickey quarters, and comes to a rigid point, which he holds. Ham and Nellie come up to him, then wave him on to flush the bird.

Belly down, erect tail quivering, he creeps forward. The grouse rockets on whirring wings. Nellie's shotgun leaps to her shoulder in a graceful sweep. Her body swings rhythmically as she sights the bird along the rib, leads, and fires.

Like a punctured balloon, the grouse collapses in midair with a spraying of feathers, and falls to the ground. Ham loosens the check cord.

With great eager, bounding springs Mickey runs to the fallen bird, takes it in his mouth and with proud eager steps returns to Ham, where he deposits it at his feet.

Unaware of my presence on the ridge, Ham and Nellie work back to where they have Clementine, his other setter, tied to a tree. Clementine is an old hand at hunting. It's a pleasure to watch her work.

Head high, she quarters the field. Glancing over her shoulder from time to time, she pays strict attention to Ham, obeying his silent commands delivered with a wave of the hand. She points perfectly. And Mickey, the pup, backs up the older dog's point.

Nellie, with her shotgun, falls back. Clementine flushes the bird. As it rockets upward, Ham's hands flash hipward, his pair of cutters leap from their holsters, and he slips both hammers. Feathers fly from the grouse as it tumbles to the earth.

"That's shooting!" Nellie cries enthusiastically. "I know now why outlaws shy away from Sweetgrass!"

"You bet!" I growl to myself. "Only instead of hunting grouse, Ham should be helping me in trying to flush the birds who are high-grading Deep Gulch Mine into bankruptcy."

That reminds me that I got work to do, so I commence to back down off the ridge. Out of the corner of my eye I catch a stealthily lifted sombrero being jerked back into the brush across the gully.

"Clem Rankin! And he ain't seen me!" I guess, congratulating myself. "He shore ain't lost no time in getting back to see Nellie."

For a feller that's scouted the Apaches and still got my hair, it's no trick for me to worm my way

around until I'm on the opposite side of the gully, and shadowing the hairpin there.

I hear his spur scrape over a rock. Hugging the ground, I wiggle toward the sound. I pause to loosen my cutters in their holsters, plumb congratulating myself on catching up with the whippersnapper who has made a fool out of me and my friend, Warden Sommers.

I part the brush, then flatten out like a hotcake. It ain't Clem Rankin that's spying on Ham and Nellie. It's Joe Peterson, her step-father.

What's he doing, shadowing them two while they're dog training? Has he somehow gotten word that Clem has flew the coop? Is he shadowing Nellie, like I am, in hopes that Clem will make a bee-line to her?

PETERSON is watching Ham's setters intently. They come to a point, some distance in front of Ham and Nellie. Peterson raises something to his lips, puffs his cheeks, and blows until he's red necked.

There's no sound, but the two dogs break their point, lifting their heads in puzzled inquiry. Peterson's cheeks puff again. The dogs suddenly commence running in our direction.

Peterson jerks something from a paper, throws it into the brush, and squirms back over the ridge.

Out on the prairie I hear Ham yelling at his disobedient bird dogs. They are streaking toward my cover, barking and yelping joyful like a couple of ill-bred mutts!

They expect to be fed! Peterson's thrown poisoned food to Ham's expensive dogs! I snap a quick look behind to make sure he's below the ridge. I hear the ring of his bronc's shoes on gravel.

Quick as a flash, I dash down into the gully and pick up what Peterson's thrown to the dogs. It's a big piece of meat.

I stuff it into my chaps pocket and hightail over the ridge, just before the baffled dogs arrive. As I'm jogging home it hits me like a ton of bricks! How did Peterson call them dogs to him? He didn't make a sound!

To me, a dog poisoner's lower than a snake's heel. If Peterson's trying to kill Ham's dogs to get revenge for the clip Ham gave him on his whiskers, I'm going to raise a whole crop of personal knuckle-humps on said Peterson's cranium.

But I can't feed Ham the meat to see if it's poisoned. And I'm danged if I'm going to eat it myself. Then, I remember the albino coyote the fellers brung in and put in a pen back of Freddie's bar. I ride over that way and toss the penned critter the meat. I figger he'll be better off dead, anyway.

The white coyote wolfs down the meat, licks his chops, and curls himself up in the corner of his cage for a nap. Two hours later, he's as healthy as a pickaninny, so I know it ain't wolf poison. And the next morning, I know it ain't poison at all. The coyote is chirpier than a sparrow!

But my pardner ain't. Ham's bluer than a tenderfoot's levis! He sits around deep in the dumps, moping like a feller that's been jilted by his best gal. Something's throwed him for fair.

"Egg," he moans, "I don't know what to do. Then setters of mine hunt like champions up to a certain point. Then, sudden and without cause, they bolt for the brush, yelpin' like kids goin' to a free Christmas tree!"

'Ham," I urge, "lay off them dogs. Help me round up Clem Rankin. He's busted outa the big corral. And whoever's high-grading at the Deep Gulch Mine is shore going whole hog. I've hid out in the brush every day for a week, keeping my range glasses glued on the mine. I've checked the unloading of every supply wagon, and watched like an eagle that they didn't load anything for the out trip. Peterson himself brings the ore into Sweetgrass. I've skulked behind him. Not an ounce of it does he attempt to ditch

in the brush. I'm sunk!"

"An' me, too, pard." Ham wails. "I had a swell scheme all worked out. Paid three hundred bucks for them bird dogs. They ain't worth the powder to blow 'em up!"

"Neither are you two old mossbanters. horns!" a voice outside of the window "No, no, boys! Don't reach for your guns! You're covered!"

ME AN' Ham jerk around to look into the unwavering bore of a .45 shoved through the open window. And behind it, with a cheerful wide grin is Clem Rankin, the escaped convict.

"I want a peaceful palaver," he announces, eyeing us narrowly. "But I was railroaded once. So I ain't taking any chances. Just unbelt your cutters and step out into the darkness."

As we go out the door, slick-hipped, Clem apologizes, "Sorry I have to do it this way, gents. Mount up, and line out on the old Mt. Santa Reta Trail. As you pass Freddie's, you might tell anyone you see on the porch that you'll be gone for a day or so. But"—Clem's voice gets brittle—"no funny business. I'll have you skylined."

Without saying a word, Clem herds us ahead of him into the Bear Paw Range for most of the night. Just at dawn, he guides us up a dim, unused side trail that winds along a cliff base, then breaks over a narrow gap into a box canyon at the foot of Mt. Santa Reta.

"Get out your field glasses," he commands. "We go ahead on foot."

After a stiff climb that leaves us panting, we top a high spur. Clem sweeps his arms down below, taking in the floor of the box canyon.

"You fellows know about this?" he asks.

Me an 'Ham shake our heads. But we ain't surprised at what we see. During the Montana gold rush of the Eighteen-sixties a lot of Mexican prospectors came into the country from California. Down below us, spread along the box canyon floor, is the ghost-town remains of their abandoned diggings.

The roofs of their weathered shacks are all fallen in. The mouths of their mine shafts are sunken, and broken machinery is rusting all over the place.

"Egg, the stamp mill" Ham breathes.

I swing my glasses, and can't believe my eyes. For the flume leading to the water wheel has been repaired for carrying water. The mill itself has been retimbered, and put in operating condition. I rise to have a better look-see.

"Keep down!" Clem hisses in my ear. "Look what's coming up the old trail!"

A single horseman, pushing three burros ahead of him has swung around a rock spur, and is heading up the canyon. I fasten my field glasses on the feller, and then look at Ham. All four of his chins have dropped to his second vest button in amazement.

"Diego Zappie, the pig rancher!" he croaks. "What goes on?"

"The garbage man!" I echo.

And that's the truth. Diego Zappie has a little two-by-four pig ranch on the outskirts of Sweetgrass. He collects garbage around Sweetgrass, and spoiled grain from the nesters all over the county, which he feeds to his hogs. But what's he doing here with them loaded burros?

The answer comes quickly. The swarthy Mex shoves his burros up to the stamp mill. Slipping off their heavy sawbucks, he turns them loose to graze along the creek. Then climbing up to the flume, Diego turns the water into the wheel.

The creaking mill shatters the mountain stillness with rhythmic hammering of the iron-shod stamps. Dumping the contents of his aparejos into the mill, Diego shoves it under the pulverizing stamps.

"High-grade ore!" Ham ejaculates, swinging on Clem. "From the Deep Gulch Mine"!

"Not much doubt!" Clem agrees. "We all know Diego collects garbage twice a week from the mine kitchen. Someone is sending out the high-grade in the garbage!"

"Let's collar him!" Ham commences to rise.

Clem drags him down, saying, "Don't be a fool! We want the hombre who's sorting out the best high-grade ore and hiding it in the garbage for Diego!"

WE WATCH Diego skillfully wash the pulverized high-grade, run it over the riffles, and carefully brush the gold into a buckskin bag. Taking the bag, he walks to one of the tumble-down shacks, removes a stone in the foundation and hides the gold.

"Now, gents," Clem smiles, handing us back our cutters, "all we have to do is locate the man who shares the stolen gold with Diego, and the mystery of the poorly paying Deep Gulch Mine is solved."

We agree that Clem shall take the first watch, Ham the next, and me the third. As we step off of our broncs at the office, Nellie is waiting for us.

"Are we going to take the dogs out today?" she asks eagerly.

"Shore, shore!" says Ham, who's rode home in a brown study.

"Ham, you idiot," I growl under my breath, "you've been up all night. You've got to relieve Clem tomorrow night. Hadn't you better be storing up some shut-eye? There's no sense in traipsing over the prairie with them fool dogs!"

"Could be!" Ham says with a shake of his head.

The ignoramus saddles up a fresh hoss, and lines out of town with Nellie and his two dogs. Now, I ain't no Paul Pry, or a snoop—well, not much of a one, anyway—but I trail along behind. Can't tell what devilment old Peterson might be up to. And I don't want him to be squeezing off a shot at Ham's shoulder-blades.

It's one of them fine afternoons for shooting. Birds are everywhere. The two dogs work like champions. Ham ain't even got the check cord on Mickey.

Nellie's shooting like an expert with her little twenty-gauge, knocking over as many doubles as she is getting singles. Ham's shore taught that gal how to shoot.

All of a sudden the fun is over. As though they were called by an invisible master, the dogs drop their point and bolt pell-mell for the fringe of brush on Wolf Creek.

It's too far for me to reach. But I'll lay my last dollar that whiskery old Peterson is over there feeding them meat to spoil their training.

Ham hollers at his dogs until he's purple in the face. Finally, he mounts up, and escorts Nellie until she's well on the road home. Protecting Ham from a drygulching, I hang on his trail.

Then he does something that makes me wonder. We've been pardners, man and boy, for forty years. And all that time I ain't been sure whether Ham's as smart as a den of foxes, or just tomfool lucky. Right now, before my very eyes on the home trail, I'm convinced that Ham's a full-fledged candidate for the house with the padded cells.

At the tin-can dump outside of Sweetgrass, Ham picks up a five-gallon can and carries it to the deserted Injun camp grounds on the river. Building a fire, he sets some water boiling in the can.

Into the water Ham pops the ten or twelve grouse Nellie's shot—feathers, innards, and all! While the birds are stewing, my locoed pardner searches up a couple of whiskey bottles from the dump, and washes them in the river.

Using his bandanna for a filter, Ham dips out some of the disgustingly smelling bird stew and strains it into them bottles. Corking the bottles tight, he puts them in his saddle pockets, tosses the rest of the goo into the

river, and heads for home.

He don't even scold Clementine and Mickey, who have beat him home and are waiting with their tails between their leggs for the whipping they know they deserve for bolting.

BEFORE dawn, Ham sets out to relieve Clem watching the gold cache in the mountains. And the following morning, I set out to relieve Ham. As I work up the ridge, I hear something that sounds like a cross between a buzz-saw ripping into a pine knot, and a cat and dog fight.

I don't have to be told what it is. I've put up with that sound the best part of my life. Parting the brush at the summit, I find what I know I'm going to find.

My pardner is sprawled out on his back, his sombrero tilted over his eyes. He's snoring like all get-out.

I scramble to the lookout and swing my glasses on the foundation of the shack where the gold was hidden. The stone's been disturbed. The gold is gone!

Mad as a wet hen, I stalk into the clearing. Picking up a dead branch, I swing it like a baseball bat, rapping Sleeping Beauty across his boot soles. Ham leaps to his feet, clawing wildly for his cutters. He sees me and grins sorta sheepish.

"Musta dozed off," he crawfishes.

"Shore! Shore!" I explode. "Only I don't call it dozing, Mr. Rip Van Wrinkle! Someone's come and got the gold. It's a wonder they didn't hear your little slumber opera and slit your throat while you slept."

"So the gold was got!" Ham yawns. "Fine!"

Now what the dickens was fine about that?"

I don't speak to Ham as we mog back to Sweetgrass. But he's as cheerful as a flitter-eared calf in a field of green alfalfa. He don't seem to care nothing about the big headache that's coming if we don't round up the high-graders.

"Egg," Ham says when we get to our shack, "yuh've never been shootin' with me over my dogs. It's time yuh was."

"I got more sense!" I snap. "Besides, I ain't got no proper shotgun."

"We'll be usin' sixes today, Egg!"

I jerk around. "Forty-fives?"

Ham nods secretive. What's the numbskull cooked up? Gosh, what did I ever do to get plagued with a pardner like him?

But I know better than trying to work Ham's pump handle. When he's got a hen on the nest, there's nothing to do but string along with him. By stringing along with Ham, come to think of it, I've been able to string up more than my share of hoot-owls.

We lope out of town with the two bird dogs at our heels. Ham heads straight for Deep Gulch Mine. About a mile from the mine, we come to Nellie Andrew's home.

Before her father died, he built himself a nice little place with about an acre of garden, out-buildings, and such. As Nellie's step-father and guardian, Peterson's refused to budge from the place.

HAM slips open the gate. We ride into the yard, the bird dogs heeling nicely. Peterson, in his shirt sleeves, gets up from his chair on the porch. His brows draw into a furious frown as he glowers at us.

"You mosshorns come to tell me you got the high-graders?" he growls.

"Nope," Ham replies airily. "Me an' Egg just want to give our dogs a workout. Mind if we short-cut through your place?"

"Yeah!" Peterson snaps ugly. "You fellers got plenty of time to hunt birds fancylike over dogs, but you ain't got no time to smell out who's high-grading the Deep Gulch into bankruptcy.

"Only yesterday I bought Ray Kipper's shares for two-bits on the dollar just to keep him from bellyaching.

You can bet your boots that he ain't going to vote for lawmen that can't pick up a high-grader!"

"Yuh've been buying up a lot of that sacrifice stock, ain't yuh?" Ham commented. "Just about got complete control of the mine now, except for Nellie's share."

"That's none of your blasted business!" Peterson flares. "If you're crossing the place, get going!"

"Shore, shore." Ham placates. "We'll go on. *Go on!*"

At the words, "Go on," the two bird dogs break from Ham's heel. Noses high, they commence quartering back and forth across Peterson's yard, as if they are field hunting. Suddenly, Clementine comes to a rigid erect point. Mickey, his nose quivering, backs her up perfectly.

"Fine training!" I snort. "They're pointing on Peterson's toolhouse!"

"I'm having a look in your toolhouse!"

"Got a search warrant?" Peterson blares, plumb hostile suddenly. "Get off my land! Get!"

"So?" Ham's voice is silky. "So, that's the way the wind blows?"

"You've got no search warrant! Take your dogs and get!"

Peterson advances threateningly toward Ham, fists clenched.

Ham's fingers leap hipward. In the blink of an eye, his six-gun is leveled at Peterson's middle, bringing him up short.

"This is my search warrant, Mister!" Ham dictates. "I'm lookin' inside that toolhouse!"

WELL, folks, what happens next takes place so fast I don't know what to tell first.

The toolhouse door swings open

**Meet Matt Younger, Hard-fighting Western trouble shooter, in COLTMAN FROM NOWHERE, a smashing novelet by JOE ARCHIBALD next issue!**

"That's queer!" Ham says, starting for the toolhouse. "I wonder what in the world can be in that shed."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Peterson fish something from his shirt pocket, palm it, raise his hand to his mouth, and puff his cheeks, as though blowing.

I don't hear a thing, but the two dogs suddenly break their point. With great bounding leaps and loud joyful barking they run toward Peterson. Clementine and Mickey jump and bark around the miner as if they expect to be fed.

Ham halts in his tracks. His fingers curry his thatch as he tries to stimulate the lop-sided wheels in his cranium into action. His close-lidded glance flicks from the toolhouse to Peterson, and back to the toolhouse again.

"What's got into your dogs?" Peterson yells. "Call 'em off!"

"They won't bite yuh!" Ham says. stealthily as an owl's flight. Diego Zappie's framed in it, arm raised. And in his hand is his deadly throwing knife.

His arm whips forward. The heavy knife hurtles toward Ham's broad back, just as my snapped shot folds up the pig rancher in the middle.

Like an echo to my gun blast, a shot gun barks from my left. In mid-air, the whizzing knife vanishes like a clay pigeon, hurled aside by a blast of birdshot. I whirl. Nellie's standing in the barn door, her shotgun still at her shoulder.

Ham's jerked around, too, his jaw slack. Peterson takes the opportunity to dive for his pocket gun. Before me or Ham can swing back on him, he's got it raised, and cocked.

The hammer falls. Ham ducks with the explosion and the slug rips through the crown of his hat. Two quick-drove blasts reverberate from the barn.

Peterson half whirls, his gun arm jerking wildly. He takes a forward step, a knee crumbles, and he spins heavily to the dust. The dogs close in, licking his hands.

Clem, his gun still cocked, dashes out of the barn, placing his body in front of Nellie. We close in on the two men. Diego's plumb done for. But Clem drove his lead high into Peterson's shoulder on purpose.

"You ain't got long to live!" Clem bluffs, jerking the limp whiskery miner to his feet. "Before you die, clear my name! Tell these men you framed me into the pen with that sack of high-grade!"

Peterson shows a yellow streak a mile wide. He ain't more than creased by Clem's bullets.

"That's true!" The miner's head rolls weakly. "I did."

"Yuh got somethin' else to get off yore chest before yuh croak!" Ham blares, shaking Peterson roughly. Confess how yuh hid the best wire-gold high-grade in the garbage for Diego to take away!"

"We were partners." Peterson moans. "I was trying to ruin the mine into bankruptcy so's I could buy up the stock cheap."

"Look!" I jab my trigger finger toward the two bird dogs.

SIDE by side, Clementine and Mickey are holding a perfect point, muzzles forward, tails stiffly erect. And, there on the ground is the object of their point. Two bulging buckskin bags that have fallen from dead Diego's grasp.

Ham starts forward.

"Hold on!" I bark, halting my pardner in his tracks. "Watch this!"

I rummage in Peterson's shirt pocket, and find what looks to be a small brass whistle. I put it to my lips, puffing as hard as I can.

There ain't a sound! But like hungry waddies stampeding to the chuck wagon when the cook beats on the dishpan, the dogs drop their stiff point and race toward me on a dead run. Rowdy yelping and barking, it's plain that Clementine and Mickey expect a feed of raw meat.

"Explain!" I roar, shaking the whistle under Peterson's nose.

"Patented noiseless dog whistle!" Peterson's strength is coming back, but his nerve ain't. "Makes such a high-pitched sound that human ears can't hear it. But dogs can. I—I figgered a good way to get even with Ham was to ruin his dogs for hunting. I followed him. When the dogs got on a good point, I'd blow my noiseless whistle and throw out a chunk of raw meat. They'd bolt for it like a house afire!"

"How come the dogs pointed on the gold bags?" Clem inquires.

"Aw!" Ham rolls his head sheepish. "I couldn't see no sense in us fellers layin' out in the brush waitin' for someone to come and pick up the gold. So I just sneaked down an' saturated the gold an' the buckskin bags with some bird scent I made by boilin' up a few grouse. I figgered if a feller carryin' any of the gold came to Sweetgrass, my bird dogs would point him out to me. I was only usin' my brains."

"Your what?" I feign slack-jawed amazement. "Ham, if you got any brains use 'em now. Help me get Peterson to the calaboose. Can't you see Nellie and Clem have a heap of courting to make up. If it wasn't for Nellie's good shooting, you'd be sprouting a knife between your shoulder-blades."

A wide grin splits Ham's face as he sees Clem take Nellie into his arms. Ham throws out his chest, cocks his head sassy, and cackles, "Feel my shoulders, Egg. I swear I'm sproutin' wings—like Cupid!"

●

**More HAM AND EGG Stories by ALFRED L. GARRY in Coming Issues!**

A Painted Post Novelet

# HATS IN

## Sheriff Blue Steele Battles an Echo from His

### CHAPTER I

*The Killer Leaps*

IN TALL cool grass beside the creek, a smallish, redheaded man lay flat, dangling a horsehair loop in the clear water. Along the shady bank a big trout swam, so near that its speckled back seemed a reflection of the little redhead's freckle-spattered nose.

Lassoing fish was a stunt typical of Deputy Sheriff Shorty Watts of Painted Post. It looked as though the trick might work this time for the trout was unalarmed. The single strand of hair that Shorty had plucked from the mane of his pinto was almost invisible as it drifted in the slow current towards the lazily fluttering gills.

A second more and a quick jerk would close the noose. The fish would

# THE DUST

**By TOM GUNN**

land flopping in the grass. Shorty was so absorbed in his odd pastime that he neither saw nor heard the man across the creek step silently down from a shiny black horse.

Shorty's first warning of the other's presence came as the fish took sudden fright, streaked under the bank and vanished. Scowling at the untimely interruption, Shorty came up on an elbow.

On the opposite bank he saw a lean, unshaven man covering him over the sights of a six-gun. The man regarded Shorty's surprise for a moment of amused satisfaction before he spoke. When he did speak, his voice was hard and grating:

"Paw high, you homely runt! And stand up!"

There didn't appear to be any choice. Shorty clambered erect and

## Own Past Which Threatens His Bailiwick!

raised his hands, with the horsehair fluttering from a finger.

"What is this—a joke or a case of mistook identity?" he spluttered indignantly.

"It ain't a joke," stated the man, "and I know who you are, Watts. You're Blue Steele's segundo and his only pal."

"You bet! And when the sheriff gits wind o' this—"

"Keep those hands up! Grab for your holster and it'll be your last grab, runt! Just back up to a tree!"

THE man's intensity commanded obedience. Shorty backed. The ground sloped sharply from the creek and the pine needles were slippery. But he dug in with his sharp-heeled boots until he touched a rough-barked pine. Then he turned slightly, so as to conceal his next movement. It would be a smarter trick than lassoing fish—if he succeeded.

The man across the creek evidently didn't see the thin strand of horsehair. He didn't see it swing in the breeze towards the butt of Shorty's .45.

He angled away from the black horse, which was drinking. He made for a line of boulders, spaced like stepping stones at the head of the pool.

Shorty fished desperately for the .45 holstered on his left hip. And he watched the man closely, fully expecting him to slip as he started across. For the boulders were half-submerged. They were smooth and waterworn and slippery with moss. A man in saddle boots had about one chance in ten of crossing without a splashing stumble.

But the man leaped and lit surefootedly and lightly. He made a second silent leap and cleared the creek, his six-gun still boring steadily at the little deputy.

Shorty felt the horsehair noose tighten on the .45 butt. He lifted gently, hoping desperately that it wouldn't snap.

The weapon came clear. Shorty tensed to grab it and leap behind the tree. But the .45 swung, thumped the tree and as he jerked it, the horsehair broke and the gun hit the needle-cushioned slope. He pounced for it as it slid. He missed. His slick boots went from under him and he sat down awkwardly.

The nimble-footed stranger leaped and got it. He thrust the captured weapon into his own holster.

"Much obliged, runt," he smiled grimly. "Just one more thing, now. Toss me your hat."

That was a strange request. Shorty lowered one hand and pawed the loppy brim for a moment as he considered it.

"What for?" he demanded. "And who in creation are you?"

The other's lips twisted into a snarl.

"So you want me to shoot it off, huh?"

Shorty tossed his prized Stetson. He growled angrily as the man crushed a foot down on it. But he was dumfounded by what followed. The man drew a pocketknife, whipped it open and with one bootsole on the wide brim he deliberately slashed out a rough pattern of his foot.

Finishing, he repeated the process with the other foot.

Then he stuffed the two foot-shaped pieces into a hip pocket and announced with brisk satisfaction:

"My trademark, that is. So Steele will know I've come."

"Yuh know the sheriff?"

"I did, a long time back."

"Yuh're a mysterious cuss!"

The other shrugged.

"What's yore object in all this?"

The answer was action more menacing than words. The man thumbed back the hammer of his six-gun.

"I ain't got any grudge against you, runt," he said. "If you wasn't so close to Blue Steele, almost a part of him, I wouldn't bother about you. It's Steele I'm after. I got the others. Ever hear Steele mention the Big Six?"

Shorty wasn't talking anymore. He looked at the eyes behind that instrument of sudden death. They were pale eyes, flat and emotionless. Shorty had met hard, dangerous characters. He had learned to know when a man was ready for a violent act. If murder ever showed itself beforehand, that unholy urge shone in this man's owlish, unblinking intensity.

Shorty raised his face slowly, so that the dappled sunlight shone on it. Close overhead was a low branch that reached over the man's head and past it. Shorty leaped. The branch lashed down. The long, sharp needles of the Arizona yellow pine whipped across those pale killer's eyes. The man cursed, flung up his gun arm and staggered back.

Shorty scooted then, like a scared chipmunk, around the tree, over a log and onto his pinto, scooping up the reins as he hit saddle. The killer's six-gun jarred the Sawtooth wilderness as the little deputy fled at a reckless run. Bark flew, a foot to his left.

The six-gun boomed twice more as he tore across a grassy meadow, through a patch of aspen in vivid yellow autumn leaf, and into thick-trunked pines again.

He heard the black horse pounding after him. He ducked his bare, red topknot and poured iron into the running pinto.

## CHAPTER II

### *Mystery Message*

THE evening after this event the twice-a-week stage from Cottonwood pulled into Painted Post. The usual crowd was at Thimble Jack's Saloon, waiting for the mail. Leaning at the far end of the bar, apart from the others, was Sheriff Blue Steele.

The mail's arrival was of small interest to him. Mail, except for official circulars, never came for the sheriff. His past was cloaked in a silence that was never broken. Steele was an enigma that Painted Post long since had quit trying to solve.

He had reached the raw little cowtown at the peak of a rustler war, in time to see the first sheriff shot down in the jail office doorway. Nobody else in Indian County dared take that job.

The bronzed young stranger with the six o'clock figure of a tireless rider had stepped into authority, cleaned out the Robles crowd and established law along the Border. He had become a classic legend, the most famous lawman in the Territory.

He still forked the high-bred steel gelding that had brought him out of nowhere. He still dealt lightning justice with a pair of white-butted Colts. His one crony and greatest admirer from the beginning was a red-headed young puncher, named Shorty Watts, who became his segundo or deputy. Rarely were they apart, as on this evening.

The gabby, snaggle-toothed stage driver, "Magpie" Stevens, tossed in the mailbag. The sad-eyed, slick-haired bartender dumped the contents onto the bar and sorted out the mail.

"Stockmen's Gazette for Judge Bertram, who ain't here, on account o' fall roundup on his T Bar T. A bill for me from the whiskey people, as usual, and how can I pay when half my customers charge up their drinks? Some pills for Doc Crabtree, all done up neat in a wooden box, same as yore patient's be, Doc, after takin'. And here's a letter."

Thimble Jack paused to examine the address on the envelope.

"All it says is 'six.' Just a big figger 'six,'" Painted Post, Arizona Territory. Huh, I wonder—"

To his surprise Steele reached a long arm and plucked the letter from his hands. The sheriff ripped open

SHERIFF BLUE STEELE

the envelope and a worn newspaper clipping dropped out.

Steele's rock-gray eyes chilled as he read it, amid a curious, respectful silence which was not broken until a lope sounded out in the dust-cushioned street. Thimble Jack peered over the batwing doors as the rider hauled up at the hitchrack.

"It's Judge Bertram," he announced. "He's all in a lather."

JUDGE BERTRAM barged in. He was a thickset, red-faced man with a shock of white hair and bushy eyebrows. He slapped something onto the bar.

"What's that fool depitty been up to now?" he boomed.

Steele was suddenly beside him, snatching up a bundle of Stetson felt from the bar.

"Where did you find this, Judge?" he crackled.

"My roundup outfit hit Sawtooth meadows today. One of my riders found it."

Magpie elbowed in.

"Dawgone! It's Shorty's hat!"

"What's left of it!" mumbled the judge. "What I crave tuh know is, what's Shorty messin' around on my T Bar T range for at this season? And is this here some practical joke of his?"

Steele's rugged face seemed suddenly haggard. He reached for a steadying smoke to a pocket of his calfskin vest. His hand dropped away without it.

"What else was found, Judge?" he asked tensely.

"Nuthin' else! Except two sets o' hoofprints! Thunderation, was you up there too, scatterin' my beef at roundup time?"

"When I've got business up that way, I drop by the ranchhouse, Judge."

"Did Shorty have business up thataway?"

Steele was too deep in his own thoughts to answer. Shorty, before his deputy days, rode for the T Bar T outfit. He usually managed an excuse to be thereabouts at roundup time. It was the call of the range in his blood.

"Who found these cut-up pieces of hat and where?" Blue Steele asked.

"Brad Haskins. Close by the creek, below the meadows."

Steel said nothing more. He thrust past the batwing doors and strode up the plank sidewalk towards the feed corral where he tossed saddle onto his steel-dust gelding.

A few moments later he was headed for the Caliente ford and the mountains beyond at a speed that few men in the Border country ever rode.

IN Thimble Jack's Saloon, Doc Crabtree picked up the clipping the sheriff had left on the bar. He focused his thick specs on it and read it slowly aloud:

CATFOOT KILLER HITS TUCSON!
Arizona's One-Man Crime
Wave Rampages South

The murderous lobo that killed four other prominent citizens in Flagstaff, Prescott, Hassayampa and Phoenix topped off his bloody work last night by killing our popular Town Marshal, Johnny Garson. His body was found on River Road, and beside

it in the dust lay the evidence that brands the crime as the work of a killer known only as "Catfoot." The clue was Johnny Garson's hat, which this fiendish showoff carved into a pair of bootsoles, same as he did with his other victims, like a savage redskin rips off scalps.

There was more, in the free-and-easy journalistic style of early Arizona. It speculated on the motive for the chain of crimes, rehashed the other killings and demanded quick capture and punishment of the evildoer.

Doc Crabtree tugged as his billy-goat goatee as he finished reading.

"Don't seem to be anything linkin' the various killings together," he speculated.

"That Catfoot hombre just up and shoots anybody handy when his boots wear thin!" yawped Magpie.

Bertram showed more concern than anybody.

"Good Godfrey! Now the varmint is roamin' the Sawtooths! On my range!" he exploded.

Thimble Jack picked up the envelope and blinked at that cryptic numeral "6." If he had been a smarter man, he might have attached some significance to the fact that five men already had died. Five, not counting Shorty.

## CHAPTER III

### *A Daring Raid*

SHORTY knew every foot of wide-flung Indian County as thoroughly as a town dweller knows his own back doorstep. That knowledge had served him in many an outlaw chase.

He needed more than a memory map of every dip and rise to save him now. Unarmed and hatless, he was pursued by a ruthless, well-armed enemy on a fast horse.

DEPUTY SHORTY WATTS

Worse than that, it was a faster horse than the blocky little pinto. It gained rapidly and closed in. Crossing an open glade, its rider shot again. A sharp stab of pain racked Shorty's left side. He clapped a hand to a rip in his shirt. The hand came away warm and sticky-red.

In the trees again, Shorty swerved his horse towards an outcrop of rock on a low ridge. He had his plan made up as the pinto dashed over the ridge. He stood up in the saddle and sprang onto the ledge.

He was crouching there like a cougar as his enemy stormed abreast of him. Like a cougar he hurled himself. The lean, unshaven man was taken by complete surprise. He flattened under the redhead's weight.

The black bucked under the struggling double burden. The two men thudded to the ground, with Shorty's left arm clamped around the other's throat, his right grappling for his own .45 in the stranger's holster.

The man backslapped with his own six-gun. A glancing blow half-stunned Shorty. It left him unprepared for the next move. Rocking forward, the cat-footed killer hurled him over his back, wrestler-style. He pointed his

gun for a slamdown shot.

Shorty kicked. One long-rowelled spur gouged the man's kneecap to the bone.

A blat of pain escaped him as the leg collapsed. Shorty swarmed onto him again. He slammed a hard-knotted fist that spurted blood from the other's nose. Blinded by gore, the man reeled up. He flung a handful of gritty earth into Shorty's face. But Shorty had plunged in and recaptured his .45. He triggered wildly twice as the man limped around the outcrop, caught up the black and spurted off.

Shorty knew he had missed. He spent precious time pawing the dirt out of his smarting eyes. Clinging to the cover of the ledge, he presently saw the pinto dragging rein in a clump of bunchgrass about a hundred yards downslope.

Shorty cinched his neckerchief around his rib-wound. It was a painful gash, but not a serious one. He knew, however that blood loss would sap his strength unless he remained quiet until the flow slowed and formed a clot.

He leveled the .45 through a notch in the ledge, aimed in the general vicinity of the pinto, in case his enemy tried to haze the animal away. Minutes ticked past. The killer didn't show up.

Late afternoon shadows lengthened from the peaks. A growing, burning thirst tormented Shorty with a craving to return to the creek.

HE KNEW Bertram's roundup crew was headed that way from the ranch. Their first camp would be on that creek meadow. It was about a mile back. They hadn't heard the shooting or riders would be making a look-see.

He had glimpsed the outfit that morning as they left the ranch corral down in the foothills on the Sawtooth's east slope. He had circled and avoided them, preferring to ride up alone rather than follow a slow cavvy through hot, brushy country.

As Shorty reflected regretfully on the decision that had brought him to this plight, he was alarmed by a noise upslope. It was the sound of loose rock falling.

The tumbling rock informed him that danger lurked above, instead of below.

"Reckon that cuss ain't so sure-footed now, on acount o' that spurred knee I gave him! Shorty calculated. "Also, I bet his shootin' eye ain't improved by that wallop on the snoot!"

It was safe now to scoot around the ledge and hurry down to the pinto. It dodged him for awhile, until he fumed the proper cuss-words. He was panting when he caught a dragging rein and blood welled from his side as he heaved himself to saddle.

"If I'm going tuh settle that snake's hash, I better git it done before dark!" he resolved.

So he rode a wide half-circle to the west, reached a level of rimrock and headed for the spot where he had heard the slide rock spill. Soon he saw a small movement in a clump of pine. He slid out of leather and leveled the .45 across his saddle.

Something moved again. Then a shod hoof clinked and he saw that the movement was the black swishing its tail at nagging flies.

He slithered towards it, tight-nerved and ready for instant gunplay. He found the horse tied. He knew then that his man was making a sneak down to the ledge where they had parted company. Stalking one another, both had missed.

By now the sun was behind the peaks and darkness wasn't far off. Shorty picketed both horses where they could graze, then nested in the rocks a little above the young pine clump.

"If that cripple-legged coyote comes back for his hoss, I'll have him," he told himself.

DUSK came, then dark and stars but not cat-footed marauder.

Shorty smelled campsmoke. He knew the T Bar T riders were on the creek meadow, unaware of the death stalk such a little way from them.

Shorty could have found his way down, pitch black though it was under the trees. But by now he was stubbornly determined to finish the fight himself. Pride played a part in it, too. A man's hat was a symbol of his pride. His had been stamped into the dust. He wasn't going to have a flock of cowhands grinning at him, a deputy sheriff. Nor would he appeal to them for help in a man-to-man struggle.

He was jarred awake at dawn by the passing of many hoofs. The sound came from the direction of the creek, but well above the T Bar T camp meadow.

"In my days on the T Bar T," Shorty grunted scornfully, "we didn't all head out in a bunch, like a treeful of owls. On roundup morning, we always spread out in seventeen directions."

It didn't dawn on him until the horses were well past that he had heard no voices. An uneasy premonition seized him. Mounting the pinto and leading the black, he traveled along the rimrock until he was overlooking the creek basin.

He gasped at what he saw. A band of horses were entering a pass that led to the north slope of the Sawtooths. Swinging a rope and pressing them closely was his man, on a T Bar T horse!

"Migosh!" croaked the little deputy. "He Injun-raided the whole outfit's cavvy!"

He blamed himself bitterly for playing the wrong cards from the start. It was up to him to straighten things out now. If he'd only gone down to the roundup camp last night—

Rashly and angrily he started after the hard-hazed cavvy and the sneak-footed miscreant. He wasn't bleeding any more. But he was hollow and weak and overpoweringly thirsty.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Under a Shroud*

BLUE STEELE reached roundup camp about sunrise to find confusion and despair. Seven T Bar T punchers confabbed sadly around a tarpaulin-covered form near the cookfire.

"This is yore job, Sheriff!" one of them cried excitedly.

Steele slogged heavily out of saddle. His eyes went to that stiffened form under the canvas and clung there. He crouched and reached to uncover the dead face. His hand faltered and came away. He pressed the back of a hand to the strained lines in his forehead as he struggled for self-mastery.

The outfit watched this pantomime in wonder. Never had they seen Steele unsure of himself before. Brisk, capable and quick to make decisions, he was a rock of dependability in times of distress. But not now.

"Knifed in the back," rasped one of the men, unable to endure the restraint any longer. "The killer cleared out with our cavvy, down tuh the last pack-hoss."

Steele pushed himself unsteadily to his feet and turned away and bared his head. The punchers exchanged puzzled glances. They had never seen the sheriff do that before. He was contemptuous of death. Death was his business. He was not one to make a sentimental show in its presence.

If the befuddled punchers had been a more voluble bunch, a few more words might have cleared away the black cloud of sorrow in which he groped for the strings of self-control.

Shorty had been dearer to him than any blood kin. Their comradeship had grown through a long succession of dangers. Some missing element in

Steele's silent, aloof nature was supplied by the gay, chattering little redhead. They had been perfect team mates.

Only once in a lifetime could such devotion come. Only once such a grief as now.

Steele did not look at that canvas shroud again. The little that had been said did not tell him the dead man was not Shorty. Events leading up to this tragic moment had given him ample reason for thinking it was.

"The cavvy headed north, up along the creek," a rider said with a husky clearing of the throat. "On foot we ain't able tuh do a whole lot about it."

Cold, savage fury surged through Steele. He hungered to meet the killer alone. He swung onto the gelding and was quickly lost from sight.

The sign was plain for a trailwise eye such as his. In the cavvy were some eighteen head. Their tracks were as clear to a skilled tracker as the plank sidewalk down in Painted Post. Up to the gap Steele hurtled, terrible in his vengeance.

"Catfoot Stankey," he vowed in silent oath to himself, "won't live to see jail or a rope."

His heart was like a lead bullet but his hard, wiry body was numb to fatigue. The weariness of night-long travel was swept away. He was immune to any physical sensation. His hatred was an all-consuming flame that devoured every other emotion.

NEAR the gap he was suddenly aware of two sets of hoofprints more distinct than the others. That told him that *two* of the horses bore riders. That flung him into new speculation. The roundup outfit had spoken of only one killer. Catfoot had played a lone hand at Flagstaff and Prescott and Phoenix and Tucson.

In his furious disregard of risk to himself, Steele welcomed the prospect of doubly avenging Shorty. He entered the gap.

The walls closed in to a box canyon of naked granite. He reached a saddle that was the backbone of the range. Here the cavvy had single-filed over a zig-zag game trail, then plunged steeply into a fringe of timber on the north slope of the Sawtooths.

From openings in the trees a wide panorama of desert filled the eye. Somewhere on the long downslope toward that uninhabited desolation known as the Smoketree Desert, Steele believed he would fulfill his grim mission.

He sought frequent viewpoints until he saw vague wisps of herd dust in a canyon.

The gelding caught its wind in the brief rests. It moved faster, with the cavvy scent in its nostrils.

Where the timber gave way to lesser growth Steele reined in sharply. His eyes, slitted to metallic glints, saw two sets of tracks slant to the left of the cavvy trail.

The ground was hard and the imprint faint. But he convinced himself by close scrutiny that one of the sets of tracks were made by a rider-laden horse.

Had Catfoot and his companion deserted the cavvy, now that they felt safe from pursuit?

So he turned away from the canyon and the dust down ahead. He followed the double trail along the edge of the timber. He went warily now, with one Colt drawn. Any second might bring a surprise.

The surprise, when it came, was complete and overwhelming.

First, he saw two horses at a spring seep. One was a tall black. The other was Shorty's pinto! The black was tethered by a rein to the pinto's saddle horn.

In the middle of the seep, close to the horses, a man lay flat. He was drinking thirstily from a shallow pool. He was partly hidden by tall grass and reeds.

Steele covered the drinking man and drew his left-hand Colt. This

promised to be a two-gun fracas. But where was the other man?

Blue Steele sighted fine on the prone drinker and his finger was heavy on the trigger. He had little compunction about shooting without challenge. But he did prefer to wring the full wretched truth out of Catfoot Stankey before blasting him into a suffering eternity.

Finished with his drinking, the man on the ground stirred and bobbed to his feet. The sheriff's vision was slitted through the sights. But his eyes went suddenly round as the standing man displayed a tousled crown of bright red hair, then a familiar freckle-spattered face.

He turned and an impish grin of greeting spread over his face.

"Hi, Sheriff!" he chirped. "Got a match?"

Steele's gun hand dropped limply. The ice in him melted, filling him with a strange, tingling warmth. The ache dissolved from his heart. He kneed the gelding forward, drawing a deep and steadying breath.

"Where you almost went just now, segundo," he said in a voice that was just a shade unsteady, "you wouldn't need matches."

"There's coffee and bacon in the black's saddle bags," Shorty told him. "If we had a fire we'd eat."

For the first time since leaving Painted Post, Steele reached into his calfskin vest for the makings. He rolled and lit one.

His thoughts went back to that still, stiff figure under the tarp at the roundup fire. Who was the dead man?

Well, that could wait. Breakfast would have to wait, too. He rubbed the match out on his chaps and pointed with the charred match stick down-canyon towards the cavvy dust.

"The Judge's riders, they'll be wantin' their cavvy back," he said casually.

"And the hombre that's with 'em," asserted Shorty, "he owes me a hat!"

He swung onto the pinto and they started down.

Shorty was puzzled by what the sheriff did then. He bared his head, as he had at the roundup camp. He looked up at the bright, early sky. It was the simple gesture of a man who was uttering a silent prayer of thanks in this outdoor temple of his merciful God.

## CHAPTER V

### *A Boot Talks*

DOWN-CANYON three miles towards the Smoke-tree on a little sage flat the cavvy grazed around a tiny pond fed by a trickle from above. On the bank Steele and Shorty saw their man. He had a boot off, pants leg rolled up and was dabbling one bare leg in the mud.

"Reckon that proves he's got a bad knee, all right!" hissed the little deputy.

At that moment, Catfoot Stankey saw them. He leaped up and crow-hopped for the T Bar T horse that wore saddle. He banged a wild shot as he upped into leather and started.

The shot had no effect on the lawmen. But it flung panic into the scattered cavvy. Startled hoofs flung up a screen of fine alkali dust that aided the fugitive in his flight. It gave him momentary safety from Steele's Colts.

Steele streaked after him. As he passed the waterhole, he flung an order back over his shoulder that rankled Shorty.

"Get his boot, segundo! Hang onto that boot!"

Steele was far in the lead when Shorty got going again. He was swapping lead with the man ahead. The boot swung in Shorty's grasp. The black gave sign of having been clubbed by its owner. It shied at the boot, hauled back and snapped a rein.

"Reckon I'm done with yuh for a

spell, anyhow, Blackie!" g u s t e d Shorty, spurring the pinto after Steele.

Steele and his quarry swept into a bend. When Shorty made the turn, Steele was pulling up. Catfoot had disappeared.

Steele was undismayed.

"He hairpinned up a blind arroyo that runs down from that little badlands," he announced.

"Good!" yelped Shorty. "We got him holed up! Well, won't be long before we're lightin' that breakfast fire, Sheriff!"

The ghost of a smile flicked Steele's lips.

"The coffee and bacon was on the black, didn't you say?" he drawled.

"Creation! I plum forgot!" fumed Shorty.

Steele turned up the dry, sandy-bottomed arroyo, and Shorty followed. The badlands was a stretch of humped-up clay and shale, bare and gullied. It was a place for a desperate fugitive to make a last stand. But it was also a place where two quick and willing gun fighters could smoke him out.

They had not proceeded far before the T Bar T horse came out of one of the gullies and trotted toward them. It did not come as a battle charger. The saddle was empty, the stirrups flopping.

"Reckon the hombre cut across tuh the mudhole tuh git his boot?" blurted Shorty. "This ain't no country for barefooted—"

He didn't get to finish. Steele sped back down the arroyo towards the main canyon in a flash of breakneck speed.

SHORTY p o u n d e d after him. Reaching the canyon, he uttered a wail of despair. The elusive killer had out-tricked them. Up-canyon, far beyond gunshot, he was on his black and making tracks for the timber.

He had the advantage of a fresh horse and was doubling over ground that he knew well from having just traversed it. It might amount to the margin that would furnish him with an escape.

"There goes your breakfast, segundo," Steele said wryly.

"Let's give him a run! There's a chance we might git in gunshot before he dodges back into the timber!" urged Shorty.

"Let's think a minute, instead. It isn't likely he'll go back through the gap."

"That's right! Too likely tuh run smack intuh some of Bertram's outfit! But—"

"He's got to bear east or west, then."

"Yeah, sure! But which?" Shorty cried helplessly.

In this quandary Steele revealed the quality that had made him an outstanding figure among western lawmen. He was a man of action and more. He was a master skirmisher and a brilliant tactician. Had destiny furnished him with armies to lead he would have been a great general. For only a second did he deliberate. Then he said suddenly:

"That boot, segundo. Let's have it."

Gladly the little deputy gave up the awkward burden. Steele first inspected the sole. On it were cemented several layers of fine hat felt.

"Migosh, no wonder he hopped over the creek so neatly and sure!" exclaimed Shorty. "Felt don't slip on wet rocks! Catfoot, yuh call him? Ought tuh be Hatfoot!"

"There's more to it than that Steele told him. He peeled away the pitch-cemented felt with a knife blade. Something between the felt and the leather sole slipped into his hand. He gave it a quick look and thrust it into a pocket.

Shorty craned, but didn't see what Steele took out of the boot sole, except that it seemed to consist of several items. He was about to ask when Steele spoke first.

"Feel fit for one more fast, hard ride, segundo?"

"Why not? If it gits us somewhere!"

Steele's eyes were on the blood-stained side of the little deputy's shirt. It was the first apparent notice he had taken of that evidence of a narrow escape.

"How about that hole in your hide?"

"Shucks, it's just rind deep! Nuthin' wrong with me, Sheriff, except I'm hungrier'n a she wolf with whelps."

"Maybe you can grab a snack at the T Bar T."

"What's that? We headin' for the ranch? Yuh figger that Mister Hatfoot is—"

Steele was off again. What had brought him to the confident decision to ride east he did not explain. That was his way. It everlastingly irked Shorty. But all he could do was to follow.

THEY scrambled out of the canyon and cut across the ridges toward Bertram's home spread. The north flank of the Sawtooths was a bewildering maze of gullies, slashed by the storms of ages. It made slow, difficult going.

Not until mid-afternoon did they sight the ranch. On fagged, lathered animals they passed through pastures and corrals towards the low-roofed ranchhouse.

There was no sign of human activity. The green, fenced pastures were almost empty. The cavvy corral was empty too. There was something ominous and foreboding in the deserted stillness of this usually brisk and busy ranch.

Not even the bark of the ranch dog greeted Steele and Shorty as they trotted into the ranch yard. A few chickens dusted themselves in the shade of a feed shed. They flapped off, squawking, as Steele reined up in that shade before proceeding towards the house.

His hard-hewn face turned into a stony mask that sent a ripple of anxiety through the little deputy.

"What's up, Sheriff?" he hissed hoarsely.

"We're too late, it looks like."

"Has Hatfoot come?"

"And gone. See that bullet hole in the back door screen?"

Only Steele's eyes could pick out so tiny a detail at that distance. Shorty shook his head.

They slogged across the ranch yard. The lowering sun was at their backs and they made the approach from different angles. Anything might happen if the fugitive was in hiding.

Their nerves, taut with suspense, would have been eased if something had happened. But their approach was unchallenged. The only sign that the felt-soled terror had struck was that hole in the screen, at a man's heart level.

## CHAPTER VI

### *A Slippery Foe*

WATTS was the first to hit the porch and gallivant across it. He swung open the screen door and froze there. He poked a finger through the hole in the screen.

"Look, Sheriff! he shrilled. "The shot was fired from *inside!*"

"Good going, segundo!"

Steele flung himself past the redhead. In the dim hallway beyond he explored the floor. His hopes soared, for he saw no bloodstains. But he stooped and picked up a small object which he took to the brighter light outside.

"A Forty-four empty," he reported.

"The judge sometimes packs a Forty-four!"

Steele went to the edge of the porch and dropped to the ground. He found two more shiny .44 empties.

"Looks like the judge shagged

somebody away from here!" gusted Shorty.

Steele nodded somberly.

"Stankey rode up, thinking the place was empty. The judge was back from town and hadn't yet headed up to the roundup camp. He came to the door."

"And seen Mister Hatfoot's bare leg. Reckernized the earmarks of a crook right off," chattered Shorty, with fine disregard for anatomy, "and cut loose!"

"That's about the size of it."

"Then Hatfoot lit out. Which way, yuh reckon? Wait, I'll have a look-see!"

Shorty scurried through the ranch yard. Steele remained on the porch, thoughtfully building a smoke until the little deputy returned scratching his red topknot and scowling.

"Dang them scratchin' hens! There's hoss tracks, but they been messed up by them dust-wallerin' chickens! Can't tell which way Hatfoot headed!"

"He headed," Steele stated nonchalantly, "for Painted Post."

"For town? How yuh figger that?"

"He's takin' that bad knee to Doc Crabtree. Also, the judge might o' put lead in him."

"Shucks, the judge never hits what he shoots at! Besides which, how's Hatfoot know there's such a party as Doc Crabtree?"

"How did he know there was such a party as Shorty Watts?" parried Steele.

Shorty puckered his forehead in intense thought.

"Come tuh think of it," he said suddenly, "how'd you know the hombre's name is Stankey?"

Steele wasn't saying just then. He vaulted from the porch to saddle. Exasperated as he usually was when left floundering in the dark, Shorty trudged across to the cookshack. He emerged with a dry, warped crust of bread and one egg.

"Slim pickin's," he complained. "But mebbe this'll hold body an' soul together. Have some?"

"Get it down and let's travel."

Shorty whacked off the top of the egg and upended it to dump the contents onto the crust of bread. A yellowish ooze dribbled out. Shorty wrinkled his freckled nose and flung the mess away and wiped his hands on his pants legs.

"That fool cook would leave just one egg," he mourned, "and that spoiled!"

Down the well-beaten town trail they saw fresh horse tracks. By now Steele knew the marks of the fugitive's horse. He knew they were not far behind their quarry.

NEVERTHELESS the ride was uneventful all the way to the Caliente River bottoms and along them to the ford where the stage road crossed. Wheel tracks there showed that Magpie had crossed on his early morning outgoing trip to Cottonwood. More distinct in the cross-light of the late afternoon were the black's hoofprints.

The steel-dust gelding and the pinto followed them into the gravel bottomed shallows.

Now that he was close enough to resume his insistent questioning, Shorty's curiosity bubbled over.

"What yuh reckon the judge done after his set-to at the ranch, Sheriff?"

"Vamoosed for the roundup camp."

"Seems he'd of tootled after Hatfoot."

"Probably figured that was my job. And the judge believed I was up yonder."

"He'll be gol-danging us for leavin' the cavvy at the mudhole."

"He'll be gol-danging himself for not finishing Catfoot Stankey when he finds one of his punchers dead."

"Seems odd you didn't find out who the pore devil was, Sheriff."

Steele's eyes were busy ahead and he gave no answer. He hadn't described those excruciating moments beside the tarp-covered body that he

thought was the little deputy's. He preferred to erase that from his memory.

They breasted the main current and were emerging on the farther bank when Steele, abruptly and without a word of warning, spurred the gelding in front of the pinto in a splashing leap.

At almost that precise instant, a gunshot erupted from the dense willows that fringed the road approach to the ford. The bullet lifted a jet of water where Steele had been.

Quicker than an echo a second shot followed. But it did not come from the willows. It was aimed there. Steele's Colt slug mowed leaves where a puff of powdersmoke lifted.

The gelding made for the bank, drenching the little deputy with spray as Steele drummed out a second shot and a third. The gun in the willows clamored again as he charged it. The bullet chopped into the saddle skirt between Steele's right knee and the gelding's ribs. It mushroomed harmlessly in the tough leather but it stung the horse into a frenzy.

With that second powdersmoke showing, Shorty went to work. He whanged three fast ones out of the blazing throat of his .45. They were making it plenty hot for the unseen ambusher. Too hot. The willows threshed as he made a frantic retreat.

Steele rode into the undergrowth, heedless of the stinging lash of branches. He motioned Shorty along the fringe of bare shore between the trees and the river.

WITH a crackling of dead, brittle undergrowth, the tall black came lunging toward Shorty. It was riderless once more. The cat-footed killer was taking his chances on foot again. He was burrowing deep into the junglelike growth where a rider would be at a disadvantage.

"Watch yoreself, Sheriff!" yipped Shorty as he caught up the black.

Steele shouted back:

"Head back for the road!"

Shorty wrangled the excited horses around. He got to the road just as Steele emerged from the willows, scratched and torn from headlong charge through the branches.

Steele had eyes for everything. He saw the imprint of a bare foot in the damp silt. The fugitive had doubled back like a fox and crossed to the trees on the downstream side, evidently hoping to throw Steele off his trail.

The sheriff met this dodge with one of his own. He did not plunge in headlong pursuit. He streaked south along the stage road. Where it mounted a low flood-cut bluff he veered left. He had the advantage of high ground overlooking the willows.

"Stay put, segundo!" he shouted.

Shorty crammed fresh loads into his .45 and stationed himself between the two horses. He discovered a bullet-hole in the black's saddle-bags.

"Huh, one of us was hittin' close," he told himself. "And there goes the danged coffee, leakin' out!"

## CHAPTER VII

### *The Other Boot*

EMPTY, gnawing hunger had reached a point where Shorty felt that he could chew raw bacon. So he delved into the saddle-bags and dragged out the warm, greasy packet.

His gusto for food almost ended his career. A husky, guarded voice came from the edge of the road:

"Keep your hands right there in sight, runt!"

The lean, unshaven killer limped out of cover with drawn gun.

"And don't budge a inch!" he rasped.

The killer had suffered since Shorty had last seen him and the marks were plain. The blow on the nose had put purple puffs under both eyes. He walked with stiff difficulty on the hurt knee.

"So we meet again," said Shorty dramatically, gripping the greasy hunk of bacon.

"For the last time!"

Catfoot snatched the black's reins and swung as though to mount. He made a swipe with his gun barrel for Shorty's bare head. He didn't want to shoot and bring Steele.

Shorty had counted on just that. He ducked, hurled the bacon in his enemy's face and dived for his legs. It was all one perfectly-timed attack. The gun slap missed but Shorty's tackle connected. A groan wrenched from Catfoot as his crippled knee was twisted torturingly and he went down.

Catfoot's greater weight gave him no advantage this time. He had spent a harrowing twenty-four hours. Weakened by hunger, nagged by unceasing pain, a new invisible enemy gnawed at his vitals now. It was a terrible fear of retribution. The sheriff of Painted Post was on the attack.

Steele was a Nemesis whose name drove courage from the stoutest outlaw heart. The champion Frontier lawman never quit a chase until it was ended. And it always ended in his triumph.

Catfoot grabbed a handful of red hair. Shorty stuck like a bulldog to that puffed, infected leg. He gave it a tendon-snapping wrench.

A crazed scream escaped Catfoot's pallid, dry lips. He lost his hairhold. He clawed like an animal for another hold. Blind luck guided his hand to Shorty's .45.

Shorty kicked it out of his hand. They were in such a fighting tangle that neither was uppermost long. Shorty battled to take the man alive. He had felt the other's weakness. He craved to wring out of him what Steele had not told, the answer to that strange fetish of soling his boots with a victim's hat.

In the first part of the struggle, Catfoot had dropped his own weapon. He saw it out of his bleared, bloodshot eyes and dived for it. Shorty grabbed his wrist as he finished the grab.

Bad luck piled on top of the little deputy's earlier carelessness. As they locked in a supreme struggle to command the weapon, Shorty's wristhold slipped from handling the greasy bacon. The harder he clamped, the easier Catfoot's wrist seemed to slip in his fingers. It was like a wet eel.

The moment came when Catfoot sensed his chance and jerked free. He swayed up, gurgling an oath, the gun aimed so close that the murderous blast would scorch Shorty's shirt.

BUT the blast never came. Another Colt did the talking, from down where the road rose gently to the line of river bluff.

It was a distance at which a Colt could not reach, according to the tables of black powder ballistics. It was a distance at which the steadiest hand could not hope to sight true.

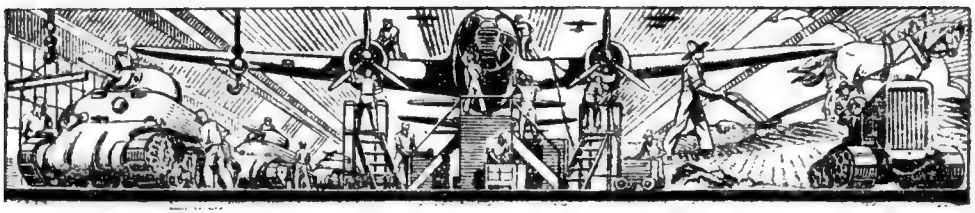
But Steele had gun savvy few other men had ever learned. The road was like a narrow shooting gallery. The wheeltracks were a guide for the eye and a groove for smoothly coordinating muscles.

Shorty heard the bullet hit ahead of the gun sound. Catfoot's gun hand faltered. Dazed, sick surprise spread over his evil, cruel face. His bad knee bent again. He dropped to a curious, praying posture. He swayed forward as blood gushed from a neatly-drilled hole in his left side, between hip and ribs.

Steele stormed up and catapulted from leather. He seized the drooping man and hauled him to the shade of the willows. He propped him up against his own knee.

"Sun going down . . . getting dark," wheezed the killer.

*(Concluded on page 105)*



# THE SINEWS OF VICTORY

## *A Tribute to America's Heroes of Production*

**By MAJOR GENERAL E. B. GREGORY**

**Quartermaster General, United States Army**

Photo U. S. Army Signal Corps

**MAJOR GENERAL GREGORY**

THE production side of this war will be won by Americans who do the small things well, whether it is making a rivet for a tank or sewing a sleeve in an Army uniform.

The casual onlooker is too apt to think of war production just in terms of big tanks, giant bombers, long-range guns and fighting ships.

These are vitally necessary. But in this war, as in every war, the men who fight are human beings. They must have food, clothing and shelter before they can be expected to fly their planes, fire their guns or sail their ships.

Throughout America today, there are millions of workers turning out clothing and tents, growing and processing foodstuffs, building barracks, raising horses and mules—all absolute necessities to the Army, all direct contributions to ultimate victory.

When historians write down the heroes of production in this war, they will spotlight those who served faithfully in the production of necessities that keep our fighting men and equipment in operation. The heroes will be the men and women who did their duty at every place in the production line.

# A Partner's Word

## By R. S. LERCH

*Ern Belden's word was enough for Jim Drake, and he knew that when his pard was hanged he had a six-gun chore to do!*

THEY sat facing each other across the table in the shack that was their ranchhouse, each lithe and young and bronzed, honed by range work to a thin, steel-sharp edge. Defeat faced them, and they weren't admitting it. They were ruined, but they weren't quitting.

Jim Drake, staring down at the rough table-top, spoke slowly as if he were alone and arguing with himself.

"We know Lanning wants our range and that his piker's offer to buy was made so we would refuse and give him what he considered an excuse to drive us out. We believe that four nights ago his J L riders stampeded and got away with the little trail herd whose sale was to keep us going another year. But we can't prove it."

Drake paused, and across the table Ern Belden tried to hold his smoldering resentment in leash while his carefully calculating partner thought things out to a conclusion.

"My uncle, up Montana way, wanted to stake us when we started," Jim continued, "but we said we didn't need any money. I reckon he knew what we were heading into. He said if we ever did need help, to come to him."

Ern's temper slipped a notch. "And so you're going up there and tell him

Ern Belden was hanged as a rustler — the old law of the range

we're licked and hollering for help. But I ain't lettin' yuh. He'd be a fool, anyway, if he backed us when we couldn't hold on to what we had," Belden finished bitterly.

"He said other things, too," Jim Drake continued, as if uninterrupted. "He said that times had changed, that six-gun law is dead, that courts of justice have taken its place. He said never to try and buck the law, but if trouble came to rely on it."

Belden snorted in disgust, but Jim had arrived at the point where he was ready to answer his partner's objection.

"And so I ain't going to tell him we're licked. I'm going to tell him we've just begun to fight—his way. The bank would take a short mortgage, but Lanning would buy it up and see to it that we couldn't pay when the time came. Then he'd get the ranch on foreclosure. My uncle would take one, and Lanning couldn't buy that. And uncle will see that his investment's protected, too, by taking care of the legal angles we don't know about."

Having finished his argument and arrived at his decision, Jim Drake arose. Then he noticed the expression on his partner's face, and he sat down again. Belden was gazing out of the window with a far-away look in his eyes, and a slight smile on his lips. Jim's gaze became intent.

He hadn't ridden with Ern Belden through dust and sleet, heat and cold, on round-ups and long trail-drives since they were buttons not to know this partner of his pretty thoroughly. If he, himself, had been arriving at a decision, so had Ern.

He watched Belden's eyes, saw the reckless glitter rise in them and saw the smile change just a trifle, from one of enthusiasm to one of battle. Belden suddenly returned his gaze to Drake and the humor had come back to his curved lips. But the glitter remained in his eyes.

"Guess you're right, Jim. You go on up there and see your uncle. It won't take you a week to get up and back. I'll stick here and see they don't steal our shack. If you start now, you can get a dozen miles north of Lariat before dark."

JIM DRAKE did not move, and his steady gaze did not shift from the eyes of his partner. Young Belden could not meet that gaze for long. His eyes shifted a little toward the six-gun and filled belt hanging from a nail at the head of his bunk.

"I've changed my mind, Ern," Drake said with slow finality. "I'm not going."

Belden's glance jerked back to his partner. "You're crazy. You got me convinced, and now you back down. What's the idea?"

Drake shook his head. "I haven't got you convinced. You want me to go, because you want me away when you break loose. You know we ain't got a chance against those trained killers of Lanning's. Your blood's flowing too fast and wild, Ern. I'm sticking. We're still partners, and we'll go out together."

When Jim Drake spoke in that quiet way, with his eyes steady and calm, Ern knew there was nothing more to be said. He jumped from the chair and made a nervous circle of the cabin, then halted and looked down at Drake. This time there was no light of eagerness, no hidden scheme, behind the surface of his eyes.

"What do you want, Jim?" he asked slowly.

Drake thought a minute. "I want to try my way first. If it fails, then we'll try yours. I want your promise to stick to our land, to hunt no trouble, not even to wear your gun, until I get back."

Belden swung away impatiently, stood for a moment with his back to his partner, then turned slowly around.

"Okay, Jim. I won't even go to

Lariat. I won't leave our land, and my gun stays where it is—*until you get back.*" He had started calmly, but the last four words cracked out savagely.

Drake immediately arose and the warm light in his eyes spoke his appreciation. He turned toward the door, but Ern called him back. Belden was holding out a six-gun and belt.

"Because you made me a sucker, *you* don't have to be one. You're going through Lariat, ain't you? And you're passing the J L? Latch this on."

Jim took the belt and buckled it around his slim waist.

When Drake had caught and saddled his mount and led it from the corral, Ern Belden held him a moment by placing a hand on the saddle horn. A faint change had come over him. He drew in his breath as if he were about to speak, then turned silently away.

"So long, Ern," Drake said. "I'll be back in six days, sure."

Belden waved a hand without looking around. Drake rode on and a foreboding of evil rode with him. He felt that Belden had had some strange presentiment of approaching tragedy.

The mood was still on him when he reached Lariat. He decided suddenly to purchase a box of shells for his six-gun. He dismounted at the general store, noting a wagon and J L horses at the tie-rail. There were several men in the grocery section of the store, but in the gloom, and still partially blinded by the glare of the sun outside, he could not identify them.

He had secured the cartridges and shoved them into a pocket of his chaps when he heard footsteps and swung away from the counter. Chester J. Lanning, owner of the J L, stood in front of him. The rancher was old and a little stooped, but he was still big and powerful, and his intolerant eyes were still domineering. His booming voice filled the store.

"Heard you and your partner lost your trail herd, Drake. Tough luck, but I ain't sayin' I'm sorry. Not since I learned you got an uncle up north by the name of Cutler. He did me dirt once, and I reckon you got his blood. Anyway, this country ain't big enough for any more two-bit ranches. I been losin' stock lately, too. I'd like to know where that trail herd of yours went, and I'd like to get a look at some of their brands."

DRAKE leaned back against the counter, face hardening. Though his glance held to the bold eyes of Chet Lanning, he noticed a little man with a twisted arm. The man left two others carrying out provisions and sauntered forward, a coil of new rope over his deformed left arm. Jim's reply was as calm and quiet as Lanning's had been bold and challenging.

"So would I like to know where they went, and get a look at their brands—now."

The little man ranged himself at one side of Lanning, and Drake recognized Warp Cardwell, the venomous gunswift ramrod of the J L. The tips of Warp's fingers were touching the shiny spot on the holster just below the trigger guard of his six-gun.

"What d'you mean by that?"

Lanning had thrust his chin forward as he bellowed his demand. He seemed to grow taller and broader and more threatening. On the other hand, Warp Cardwell appeared to shrink, to settle a little lower while the fingers of his gun hand became slightly curved.

Jim Drake got the set-up immediately, and knew he'd never leave the store alive. They had seen him come in, had immediately set their trap, and he had had no chance to avoid it.

His danger lay in Cardwell, and he was no match for the warped little killer. But he might get Lanning,

even with Cardwell's lead in him. He set himself.

The shadow of someone passing the store window, pausing, then continuing, reached him. He wondered, inconsequentially, who it was. Then he gave his reply slowly, alert for the first sign of movement in Warp Cardwell's right hand.

"I meant just what you think I did, Lanning."

The door was thrown open and the man who had looked through the window entered.

"What in blazes is going on in here?" came a sharp, hard demand.

Sheriff Hondo Hicks let his cold, blue glance travel over the three men. Lanning jerked as if he'd been stung. Warp Cardwell straightened a trifle and the look he gave the tough officer with the gray, handle-bar mustache and the icy blue eyes was one of doubt, doubt of his own ability to take care at the same time of both his intended victim and this officer.

"What d'you mean, Sheriff?" Lanning blustered. "Nothing's going on, and anyway, it ain't your call to horn in till you're needed. There's been no crime or no gun-throwing here, and—"

"And there ain't going to be. You look as though you was ready to leave, Drake. That right?"

Drake nodded. "That's right, Sheriff. I've had my say." He headed for the door.

"And I'll have mine later," came a little, whispery voice.

His threat thus given, Warp Cardwell joined the men who were loading the wagon. Chester Lanning grunted again, and swung around, putting his back to the sheriff. Hondo Hicks leaned against the dry-goods counter and began to roll a quirley.

ON HIS return trip Jim Drake reached Lariat late in the evening and stopped for a long-delayed meal. He noticed one of the J L punchers lounging in front of the Drover Hotel as he entered, and saw him riding south out of town immediately afterward, but his own mind was so filled with the success of his mission that he gave the circumstance no thought. He hurried through his meal and left.

Under ordinary conditions he would have stayed over until the next day and deposited the check his uncle had given him, but he was too anxious to break the good news to his partner.

Ern Belden must be told, also, that his uncle wasn't stopping with the loan. A Cattlemen's Association detective would be coming to look into the loss of their cattle.

Old Bull Cutler, when he had learned that it was Chet Lanning who was bucking his nephew, had waited only long enough to explode a curse before offering twice what Jim Drake had asked.

Lanning, at the beginning of his ranching, had tried to drive out Bull Cutler. Six-guns and rifles had been judge and jury in those days, and Bull stayed while Chester Lanning moved on to try his methods farther south where his neighbors weren't so tough.

Thinking of these things, Jim Drake thrilled to the stories his uncle had told him of the old days. He felt in himself something of the same wildness that had threatened to govern his partner, Ern Belden.

But old Bull Cutler had laid down the law, too, about that loan. Times had changed. Law had come to stay—and order would soon follow.

"If you two young buckaroos go wild and start slinging lead, I'll call that loan and take over your spread so fast you'll be dizzy for the rest of your lives," he had sworn.

Jim grinned as he rode the trail to the little ranchhouse. A silver disc of moon pushed aside the clouds and flooded the rolling country with pale light. He mounted a wooded ridge and descended to the head of an expanding valley that swept away to the west.

This was his and Ern's upper range. Jim's gaze roved over it. Something heaved up and moved restlessly. Other dark forms arose. Cattle, more than usual on this north meadow.

Then he understood. Ern Belden, with restlessness urging him on, had moved their stock from the lower meadow. Thinking about it, Jim wasn't sure it had been a wise move. This valley was too near the J L range, was too much of a temptation for Lanning and his tough crew.

But his spirits were high and he could not let the matter worry him for long. The opposite ridge loomed before him. The trail angled up to the wooded crest, and from there he would be able to look down onto their shack. He put his bronc to the slope. At the top he'd send his long, high yell of greeting down to his partner.

A wisp of cloud dimmed the moon, passed, and pale light once more flooded the night as he reached the crest. He halted, eyes narrowed, body quickly tense. Then sick horror flowed through him.

AHEAD, where the trail passed between two boulders and beneath the spreading branches of a cottonwood, a black shadow had moved. There was also something behind the rock on the opposite side that did not seem a natural part of the landscape.

Recollection of the J L puncher hurriedly leaving Lariat and its possible connection with the moving shadows on each side of the trail ahead had brought the sudden tension. What induced the horror was what he had seen hanging from a limb of the cottonwood, directly over the trail.

He did not need strong daylight to identify it as a human form, nor closer inspection to recognize in the slope of the shoulders and the outline of the head, tilted unnaturally by the rope with the hangman's knot beneath the ear, the body of his partner Ern Belden.

FOR a long second Jim Drake remained motionless. Then, slowly, he drew a clasp knife from his pocket and opened it. He looked up at the sky. A larger patch of cloud touched the edge of the moon. He waited. The cloud moved on and the night became black.

Leaning forward, low in the saddle, he dug in the spurs. The bronco shot ahead like a released spring. Drake reined in strongly, bringing the horse up on its hind legs as men appeared from behind the boulders.

Drake dropped the knotted reins behind the saddle-horn and rose in the stirrups, one hand reaching high, the other encircling the body of Belden. He slashed twice and the body came loose in his arms. It was limp, but cold. Ern had not been dead much over an hour.

Red fire-spurts winked on both sides of the trail ahead. The body in his arms jerked to the impact of bullets. Even in death, Ern Belden was protecting his partner. The spurs were jabbed in and the bronc became a buck-jumping shadow fading down the slope of the ridge.

Directly ahead the lights of the shack shone invitingly. At the foot of the ridge, Jim Drake swung away from them, racing westward.

He kept to the edge of the northern slope, while to the south startled cattle got nervously to their feet and milled briefly. They quieted as the flying horseman faded from sight, only to be startled a second time as a half dozen riders charged in pursuit.

Jim and Ern had hunted through the back country enough to know every gulch and canyon, every butte and mesa, and the sun, topping the eastern skyline, looked into the narrow, brush-concealed mouth of a deep, wide cave on a rugged mountain slope.

It revealed a stiffened body with a silent figure seated beside it. Back of these two a saddled horse stood.

Jim Drake didn't know how long he sat there in the gloom, staring at nothing, his hands gripping the piece of rope that had encircled his partner's neck. He looked down at the rope finally and saw that it was new. He recalled the rope Warp Cardwell had bought in Lariat. Then he threw the thing from him, stood up, and began to pace the cave.

So the whole thing had been planned, and he was to have been included in the hanging party. But his departure from town had delayed matters and a second scheme had taken its place.

There were the cattle on the upper meadow. Passing through the lower valley with the body of his partner he had seen their own small herd still there. Ern had not moved them from one valley to the other. But the second plan had failed, too.

Or had it? Ern Belden was hanged as a rustler—the old law of the range. And he, himself, was now branded, with not only the J L, but the law on his trail. Law! Justice!

"Rely on it—go to it for help," his uncle had said.

Drake smiled bitterly.

Tramping the cave, Jim Drake let the tempest of wild rage and hate, of sorrow and passion for vengeance, roar through him. He cursed the law for tricking him; he cursed himself for the promise he'd exacted of his partner.

If Ern Belden had been wearing his six-gun he'd have died like a man, not like a cowardly, night-riding thief. Now the dead eyes of his partner were looking up at him accusingly, asking him what he was going to do about it.

AT LAST Jim Drake sat down. The sun had reached the zenith and was descending westward. The storm had worn itself out, and Jim began to think more clearly. At last he went to the mouth of the cave and carefully surveyed the valley below, the ridges beyond, and the slopes of the mountain on either side.

Nowhere could he see a sign of the men he knew would still be hunting him. He returned and went to a corner of the cave.

There were provisions, a frying pan, and a pail. He and Ern had used them more than once, for this was a favorite over-night camp when they were hunting. He ignored the food, but picked up the frying pan and began to dig.

It was dusk when he finished and stood, dry-eyed, staring down at the low mound where had been only smooth, level floor. Finally he led the horse out into the open, mounted, and headed back.

He rode slowly, pausing to listen, never crossing an open patch without first determining the source of every moon-cast shadow, every motionless object he could not at once identify. He swung away from the lower range and entered the upper meadow at its western tip.

Circling under cover of the forest growth on the slopes, he finally became convinced that no one was waiting there. He rode into the open and looked over the cattle.

Each bore the D B brand, but all had been fashioned with a running iron out of the J L of Chet Lanning, and most of the work was so crudely and hastily done that it would not have deceived a tenderfoot. Jim Drake rode north, following the trail of the cattle.

It was daylight again when he once more crossed the ridge between the two ranges of the D B. He had been forty-eight hours without sleep. He paused under cover to stare down with burning eyes at the little shack and the corral.

There still were horses in the corral, but there was no other movement around the place. Apparently it was deserted. He didn't care much, anyway.

He rode into the open, and his tired

horse walked most of the way. He dismounted stiffly and left the reins dragging. He'd shift saddles to a fresher mount later. Maybe he could eat a little now. He hadn't felt like it before.

He shoved open the door, and his gaze centered first on the empty bunk. Ern Belden's gun and belt still hung from the nail at its head. And then he stiffened, walked slowly forward, and slumped into a chair across the table from the stern-featured Hondo Hicks.

"Where's your partner, Jim?" Hicks asked, the roughness of his abrupt question smoothed slightly by the casual manner of its asking.

"Glad you're here, Sheriff. It'll save me a trip to town," Drake said, ignoring the officer's query.

"I said, 'Where's your partner?' You're both wanted for rustling."

"In a boot-hill where the carrion-feeding buzzards who hanged him will never get their hands on him again." This time Drake's weariness had disappeared and some of the bitter rage he had held in leash escaped to manifest itself in his clipped words as he glared back at the square-jawed Hicks.

Hondo Hicks drew a breath of surprise. Then his wise old eyes examined Jim Drake.

"Maybe I better hear your story, kid," he said finally. "Go ahead."

DRAKE put his elbows on the table, leaned forward, and looked down at his work-scarred hands. He began with the night stampede of the little trail herd he and his partner had been driving to the railroad. He missed nothing in the telling up to the time he had buried Ern Belden in the lonely cave. When he had finished he pushed himself to his feet.

"Now, if you'll come I'll show you something," he concluded.

Hondo Hicks made no move to get up.

"When did you eat last, kid?" he asked quietly.

Jim stared at him. "Why—last night—no night before, in Lariat."

The sheriff got up and turned to the stove.

"You stretch out on that bunk while I rustle some grub. Ain't had breakfast myself, yet. Ought to take your gun, but I reckon I won't for awhile yet. However, don't get any ideas when I turn my back."

Only a gentle snore from the vicinity of the bunk answered him. It was two hours later when Hondo Hicks gripped Drake's shoulder, awaking him instantly.

"If you got something to show me, we better eat and move. Lanning and his men may give up combing the country for you and come back here."

When the meal was finished Drake went to his partner's bunk and took down the gun and belt and buckled them on over his own. Watching him, Hicks hid a faint smile beneath his gray mustache, but said nothing.

Out at the corral Jim turned his tired mount loose and saddled one of the others, while the sheriff threw his kak on his own mount. Drake led the way northward.

On the upper range he rode to the herd of over a hundred white-faces and halted, indicating the flanks of the nearest animals. The sheriff took one brief glance at the blotted brands.

"I've seen these once. What you trying to do, prove to me you *are* a rustler?" Hicks asked quizzically.

Drake said merely, "Come on," and led the way along the trail he had followed the night before.

Eight miles across arid valleys, along dry arroyos and boulder-spotted gullys, and they came out at the western end of a broad, grassy rangeland. Jim Drake waved a hand toward the eastern horizon where a thin ribbon of smoke was just discernible in the quiet air.

"The JL headquarters off there," Hicks muttered.

The trail rounded the sloping end of a long hogback and continued for a half mile to a deep bay between patches of timber. Both the range and the smoke from the ranch buildings were hidden from view.

The ground was dotted with straggling bunches of grass trying to hold onto life in the clay and gravel. At the far end of the pocket Jim halted and pointed to the blackened remains of a small fire.

Hondo Hicks dismounted, examining the fire and the mass of cattle and horse tracks on the ground. Fifteen minutes later, he walked slowly back to his waiting horse and the mounted Drake.

"Hold up your right hand," he suddenly commanded.

Startled, Jim obeyed automatically. Then his eyes widened as he listened to the sheriff's swift speech. When he lowered his hand a brief, bitter smile stretched his thin lips for a moment. Hondo Hicks snapped, "Let's go."

THEY reached the open range and headed for the thin column of smoke, but they didn't get far. The alert old peace officer suddenly reined in, holding up a hand to check Drake. He remained motionless for a long moment, staring southward toward the mouth of a draw, his gray brows drawn down, his steel-blue eyes narrowed and piercing.

A dark patch had appeared. It left the draw and a cloud of dust began to rise behind it.

"They're heading for that arroyo that runs behind the ranchhouse. Come on," and Hondo touched spurs to his mount.

Almost at once the dust cloud changed, shifted, and formed a plume of gray background for the group of horsemen.

"They've seen us. They know where we've been," Drake called.

But Hondo had likewise changed his direction. "Ride," he called over his shoulder, and the command was sharp with the urgency for speed.

Drake raked his horse's flanks and swung in behind Hondo Hicks. The sheriff headed southwest, toward an unbroken line of low cliffs that stretched from the open range to the draw the horsemen had just left.

There was a grove of aspens at the base of the cliff at one point. Hondo Hicks was riding straight for that grove.

"Danged poor cover," Jim muttered to himself, then spurred alongside the sheriff. "We better try to make the draw where we'll have a chance. With both of us dead, Lanning can make up a yarn about us killing each other when you come to arrest me."

Hondo Hicks made no reply. He kept riding straight for the trees.

Drake looked back over his shoulder. The J L riders were within a quarter mile now, and forcing every ounce of speed from their mounts. Then Jim saw that the grove did not extend clear to the cliff. There was a hundred yard open stretch.

Beyond that was a narrow opening in the cliff, a crack scarcely a dozen yards wide. Jim charged across the open stretch and saw the sheriff swing down just inside the opening and slap his horse on the rump, sending it down the defile. Drake drove his own horse on as he swung down. He turned to the officer.

"Well, there go our horses. We probably won't need 'em any more, anyway," he said tightly.

"They won't go far," Hicks returned imperturbably. "And neither will we. This is a blind crack in the cliff—pinches out just around the bend. You get to that fault over there. I'll take cover behind the outcrop on this side, and we'll both pray they haven't got rifles."

If they did have rifles they didn't use them. Apparently thinking their intended prey had tried to ride on, not knowing they were entering a blind passage, the J L men came

ahead, eager for the kill.

Both Drake and Hondo Hicks remained hidden until the group were halfway across the open space. Then the sheriff fired four shots. Two horses and a man went down.

The group reined in and jerked their mounts down for cover, or threw themselves behind the dead animals. Lead rattled against the rock walls and went singing up the gorge. Hondo Hicks' yell went high and wide above the pound of guns and the firing ceased.

"Hold it, you crazy fools!" he yelled. "You're bucking the law." While he yelled Hicks was punching fresh shells into the cylinder of his gun.

Old Lanning's bull voice answered.

"Blast your law! We want that cow thief. Hand him over, or we come in and get him."

"Drake," came a high, thin call from behind one of the dead horses. "I told you in Lariat I'd have my say later. I had it once already, with your red-headed partner—and a rope. I got some of that same rope here to speak its piece to you."

The evil, grinning face of Warp Cardwell bobbed into sight and disappeared immediately.

SOMETHING happened inside Jim Drake then. With more than two days of constant action and grief behind him, perhaps he was not mentally normal. Certainly whatever cool judgment he possessed exploded into mist.

The taunting admission of the little foreman that he, himself had fastened the noose on Ern brought an uncontrollable wildness Drake had never guessed he possessed.

"Hold it, all of you!" he yelled. "Warp, I'm coming out. Get up and meet me—if you got the nerve."

"You blasted fool. Stay where you are!" Hicks rapped from across the passage.

Warp Cardwell immediately appeared. "Just what I wanted, ranny. The rest of you hold your fire. I'll settle this deal. Ever feel lead in your belly, Drake? You will—and it hurts plenty before it kills you."

While he kept up his running line of chatter he was advancing at a crouch toward the defile. Jim Drake was out from behind his own cover and working his way along the wall, keeping to a narrow belt of shadow.

Cardwell could not yet get a clear shot at him. Shade and the unevenness of the wall melted together to make a deceiving shadow of Drake, Jim, too, held his fire. He planned one, wild bit of desperate strategy which might work. If it didn't he wouldn't care too much.

He stopped just short of the end of the shadow-band. Warp was weaving from side to side, endeavoring to get a clearer view of Drake. In the midst of one of those peering, sideways movements of the little gunfighter, Jim leaped into full view and closed in at a crouching, zigzag run. There was a gun in each hand and both were blazing.

The very suddenness of the move tricked Warp into hurrying his first shot. It tore through Drake's shirt and before the second came, Jim had fired four times.

At least one of those shots caught Cardwell, staggering him. And then Drake was in close. He raised the gun that had belonged to his partner. This time he sighted while Cardwell fought to hold his balance and swing his six-gun into line.

Warp almost succeeded. He was earing back the hammer when Jim Drake fired his last shot.

At that same instant three men boiled out of the woods behind the attackers.

"Drop it, Lanning, you sidewinder! Shuck those guns—all of you!" roared a gray-haired, iron-jawed man mounted on a black stallion.

The men on each side of him held cocked six-guns on the J L crew, and

they came forward alertly. Lanning looked over his shoulder at this new command, and cursed.

"Bull Cutler!" he cried. "I might have known you'd show up."

HONDO HICKS was out in the open now, and the three J L men with Lanning were standing with their hands in plain sight and their guns at their feet.

"Sheriff, this is Mieker, Deputy U. S. Marshal, and Innes, Association Inspector. We came down to see about some cattle sold to the government. Their brands was sort of blotted to a J L, but they'd once been D B."

Hicks nodded and a faint smile appeared on his thin lips.

"A little trail herd that disappeared a couple weeks ago, I reckon. You're Drake's uncle, I take it. Like to have you meet my new deputy."

The old rancher grunted, and that was all the surprise he showed as he swung on Jim Drake.

"So you *are* playing on the right

[*Turn page*]

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side. I was skeptical. Knowing some of my own kind of blood's in you, and seein' what you did a minute ago, I thought maybe I'd come too late."

IT WAS while the little cavalcade was on its way to Lariat and the jail that Hondo Hicks rode up alongside Jim Drake.

"Son, you never noticed that the horses used by the J L rannies when they changed the brands on their own cattle and drove them to your north range to make rustlers out of you and Ern were shod like cutting horses, with iron on only the hind hoofs, while yours in the corral were full shod. Did you think that just because the branding was done on J L land that that proved Ern Belden hadn't done it while you were away? Did it prove to you he hadn't started this mess?"

Slumped in his saddle, Jim Drake finally raised his head, and his tired eyes held to those of the sheriff.

"I noticed the shoe marks, and knew you would. But I didn't need proof for myself. I had my partner's word."

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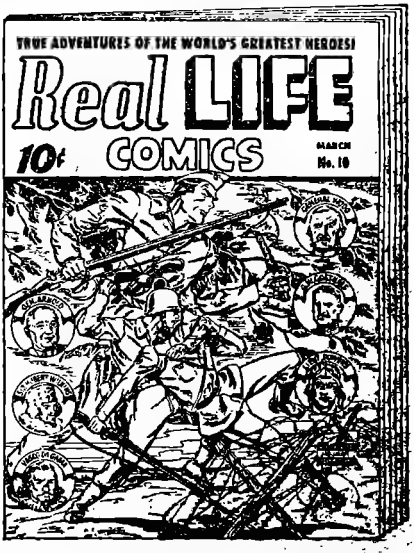


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## HATS IN THE DUST

*(Continued from page 92)*

"Not yet it's not. You'll never see another sundown, Stankey."

Catfoot Stankey raised his lolling head.

"Blue Steele," he mumbled indistinctly. "You . . . last of the Big Six. Warned you . . . my mistake. . "

"Your mistake was jumping the segundo," Steele told him.

Shorty crowded in close.

"What's that he's sayin,' Sheriff?" he demanded.

Steele motioned him away.

"The man's just raving. Get him some water."

Shorty wanted to rebel. It was obvious by now that in these hat killings there was a mystery that Steele did not intend to reveal. He picked up Catfoot's hat. When he trotted back from the river's edge, Steele was standing, rolling a smoke.

"Catfoot Stankey died with one boot on," he said with an ironic quirk of the lips. "I'll collect the hosses. Take it easy, segundo."

Shorty dumped the hatful of water with a snort. His eyes went to that one bootsole, pointing to the crimson western sky. Did it contain any solution to the wanton acts of this dead marauder?

Steele was in saddle, rounding up the shying black and the pinto. The little deputy whipped out a pocket knife and slashed open the felt covering as Steele had done on the boot from the waterhole. He fished in with a finger.

From that soft-padded repository he

[*Turn page*]

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drew out an old-fashioned photograph, dim with age and worn from handling. It was a picture of six men, all armed and dressed in Frontier garb. They were strangers to him, all but one.

That one, at the right in the stalwart line, was familiar. Even after a decade the rugged face and six o'clock figure of Blue Steele had changed hardly at all.

SHORTY blinked and stared at a faint, inked caption at the bottom of the picture. It said:

VIGILANTES OF ARROWROCK

Steele was back with the horses. Shorty, with a feeling almost like guilt, thrust the photograph into the soft, moist silt and covered it hastily with a knee.

Steele stepped out of saddle and took something out of a pocket of his calfskin vest. At once Shorty knew that these were the articles the sheriff had taken from the first boot. He felt a touch of red-eared shame, now that Steele was about to reveal something, after all.

Steele tossed the articles down. There were two thin, pliable hack-saw blades, such as a man could use in cutting jail bars. There was a razor-thin knife without a handle and a slim, folded wad of greenbacks.

"Stankey," mused the sheriff, "was ready for come what may."

"Who was he?" blurted Shorty.

He could see Steele's inner struggle against the old habit of reticence. He inhaled deeply twice from the cigarette, choosing his words sparingly.

"Well, segundo, a long time ago the Stankeys were a lot of people. They had many cattle, miles of range. They took 'em, back in the days when the law was weak and they were strong."

"What happened to these Stankeys?"

"Six was their unlucky number," was the enigmatic answer.

"Vigilantes whittled 'em down, huh?"

Steele gave him a sharp look.

"Down to one. He lived quite a

spell. Until today, just now, in fact."

"Sheriff," Shorty asked pointblank, "where's Arrowrock?"

Steele took a final drag at the cigarette and flipped the butt toward the river. His face was blank as stone. Shorty knew that his question would never be answered.

If Steele wanted to conceal that stormy chapter of his past, it was all right. Vigilantes had to be close-lipped men. They were tied together by an oath of secrecy, he had heard. Their exploits were never told.

Steele finally spoke.

"Bein' the last of the Stankeys, he won't need that money layin' there."

"You aim to do something with it?"

"If I needed a new hat like you do, I'd use it."

With that, Steele toed a hole in the moist bottomland and buried the knife and hack-saw blades.

"A hole in the ground," he said gravely, "is the end of man's endeavors. C'mon, segundo. Let's rope the load on the black."

*Next Issue's Painted Post Novelet*

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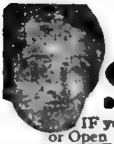

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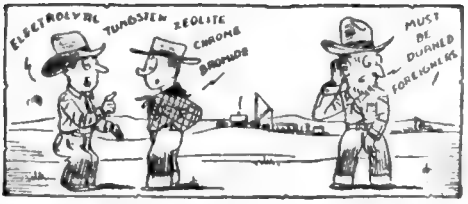
## THE HOME CORRAL

*(Continued from page 12)*

You can't get machinery or men to mine it. The talk is full of outlandish new terms




the oldtime miner never heard—oxides of this and bromides of that, electrolytic processes and priorities.

The new minerals are tungsten, manganese beryllium, cinnabar, zinc, lead, tin, chrome and always, of course, copper. The more they dig of copper, the more the need and greater the shortage.

There's a flock of non-metallics, from asbestos to zeolite, that's on the strategic list, in enormous demand by the wizards of chemistry. There's even talk of extracting some of the minerals held in solution deep in the waters of Mead Lake.

### *Sky-High Prices*

Food prices and rent are sky-high in boomtown Las Vegas, wholesome pastimes mighty near totally lacking and the summers are terrifically hot, with freezing but snowless winters. It's adventure to be a part of what's going on there now, but it's not fun.

Lots of folks can't stand it and clear out for places where living is softer. The elevation in the town is around 2,800, but at the lake, 30 miles away, it's only 1,320 feet. The only thing that's cheap is electricity. It's used for cooking and heating, and in air-conditioning. Basic Magnesium alone used enough current to supply a city of one million.

### *Camps for Japs*

To the south and east of Vegas are camps that hold the Japs evacuated from the Pacific Coast, something like 110,000 of them. So far no successful plan has been worked out to employ them where there are serious labor shortages, such as on farms.

They are housed and fed better than war workers, and instead of relieving food shortages, supplying them has caused food shortages in some instances.

The Mayor of Phoenix a while back raised a row in Washington because Phoe-

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nix was going short on fresh milk that went to a Jap center that had refused to work in Arizona cotton fields.

But there are no Japs in or right around Las Vegas. It is a military zone. Near the dam is an Army camp, and the main duty of the soldiers there is to guard that precious heart of many great war industries. The precautions, of course, cannot be told in detail. But they are plenty numerous.

On top of all the rest that's going on, great stretches of the uninhabited desert is being given over to practice bombing and to military maneuvers. The country is so rough and broken and the summers so hot that Army men say Africa would seem like Norway compared to it.

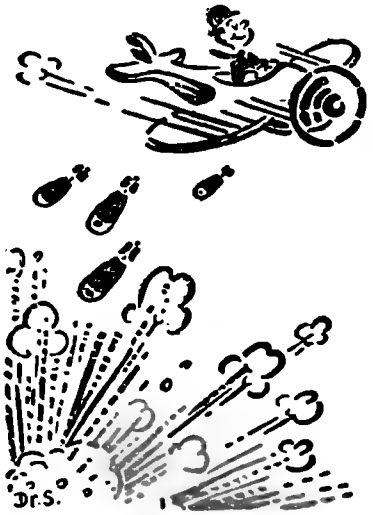
### *Travel at Night*

In the summertime, highway travel between Las Vegas and the Pacific Coast, and other far off points, is done mostly at night. When dark falls, out of nowhere appears bright-lighted traffic that makes a twisty, glittering dragon over the bleak Mojave Desert, a procession almost unbroken for hundreds of miles.

It is not a flat sand waste like the Sahara. It is broken by basin ranges, where some of the passes climb to the 5,000-foot level, then dip again to less than 1,000 feet above the sea.

The day will come, say traffic experts, when labor armies will bore tunnels through these formidable barriers. Railroads and highways will share these monster bores. These and better-surveyed routes will cheat the weary desert distances. It's part of the future of little ol' Las Vegas, folks out there say.

[*Turn page*]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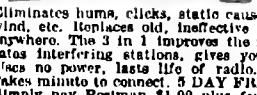

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## OUR NEXT ISSUE

VAST vistas of rolling rangeland, rugged mountains towering high into the sky, the thudding of galloping hoofs, the roaring of six-guns—a glittering panorama of the pulsating life of the cattle country. Once again it breathes anew in the pages of POPULAR WESTERN as old friends and new foregather in the next issue.

There's Matt Younger, Western trouble-shooter, who has a way of getting things done right. Sheriff Blue Steele and Deputy Shorty Watts from Painted Post. Vic Donley, who goes into battle over fence posts. These and others all play their parts in the great dramas of the West as do other men of the wide-open spaces who send their horses galloping through the next issue of POPULAR WESTERN.

First comes Matt Younger, the leading character in COLTMAN FROM NOWHERE, an exciting novelet by Joe Archibald. Matt has lived well beyond his twenty-six years. He has been in the pay of many men, from the Texas Panhandle to the Rio Grande, from the Pecos to Tombstone. He has ridden with the wild bunch, and has been a tracker for the Rangers.

He rides into trouble again when he heads into the Seven Rivers Country. There are hard men there, who want Matt

[*Turn page*]


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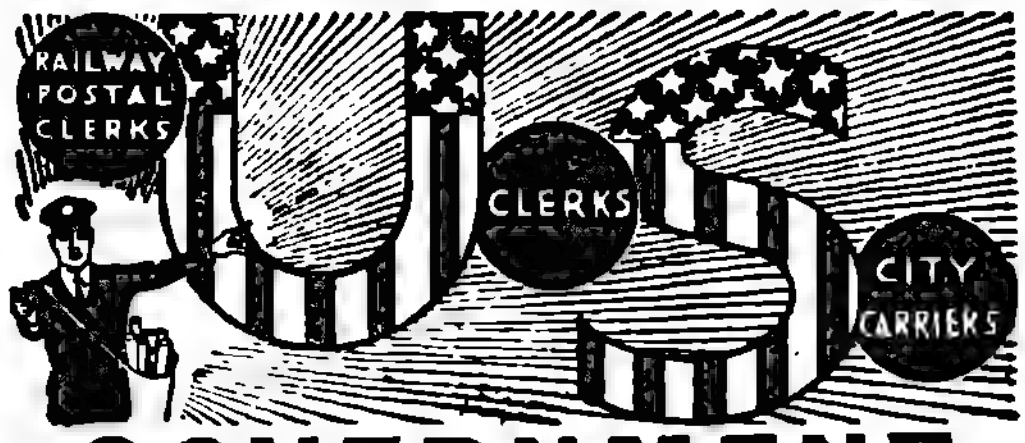


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STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933, of Popular Western, published bimonthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1942. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Popular Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. HERBERT, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 9th day of October, 1942. Eugene Wechsler. Notary Public. My commission expires March 30, 1943.


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—THE EDITOR.

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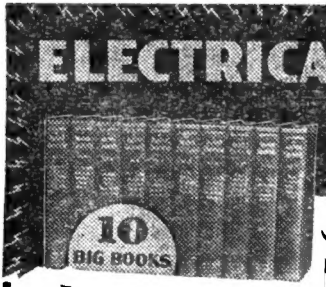


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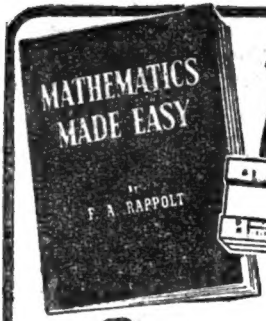


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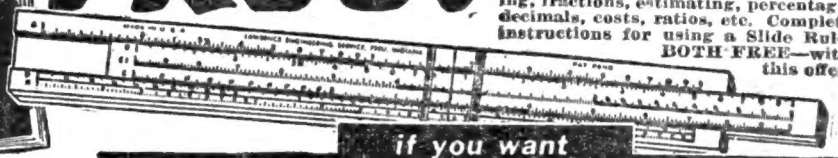

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